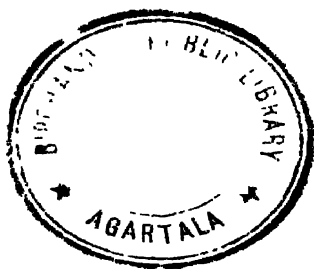


AT THE GATES OF MOSCOW

A NOVEL
BY
MENDEL MANN

Translated by
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Chapter One

AN October Sunday in 1901. Hundreds of farm carts crowding together, crudely made and brightly painted, their horses bony and undernourished; a throng of people ill-clad in plaited straw and rough wool; men, beasts and carts in a tangle, jamming the road that runs through the Russian village of Tengushai.

The men had come to join the army, from all the villages and hamlets in the neighbourhood. The men from Kulikovo had come first, identifiable by the distinctive high wheels and double shafts of their carts: older men with straw sandals hanging from rope girdles and sacks of food on their backs, younger men at ease on the carts, with much music from ivory-mounted mouth-organs; one youth, fair hair tumbling out all round his black sheepskin hat, crooning one single chorus to himself time and time again, tapping his hands for accompaniment.

Their women had come too, to see them off, and in their best finery: aprons in red and yellow, plenty of lace and embroidery, white ribbons flying, flowery red scarves round their heads. They were tall and slender, these people from Kulikovo, and they spoke musically, in a silvery, bell-like way: they had an air of brightness and splendour, the sight of them gave pleasure, people deferred to them.

Then, in silence, others had come: men of the forest from Barashovo, their beards wild, their hands gnarled into knots; these kept close with their women beside their ponies, whispering secretly among themselves. Carts covered in rough bark instead of cloth, crude straw sandals, belts of bark instead of leather: these people had been men of the woods for uncounted generations, thick tough men, living in the unmeasured dark

reaches of the Barashovo forests, stretching out to Bashkiria and the Urals and the taiga far beyond. Lately, road-making had been their life, with timber and brush to be cut and rammed down to form a solid foundation in the peat swamps. Now the road they had made ran as far as the narrow-gauge railway, and from then on to the main-line station at Potma: but there were still quagmires beneath and on either side, and you felt the road trembling and swaying as you went.

These men from Barashovo were like all their kind, secretive with the mystery of the forest; they looked like trees themselves, their limbs great knotted roots, more than a match for any peasant saw. And these other peasants knew them well: every villager drove off to the forest at one time or another for timber.

‘Good day to you, Kuzma!’

‘And to you, my lad!’ said Kuzma, his Barashovo hand heavy on a Kulikovo shoulder. ‘So we’re going together, are we, little brother? Is Mother Russia calling us?’ His voice rolled, like the thunder of a falling tree.

The other was Kolka, who only a few weeks previously had fetched from Barashovo the timber to build himself a home. That wood was still lying there, planed, trimmed and true, in front of his father’s house. It would have to lie there now, and wait for easier times; this was the day that saw his luggage all packed and his young wife weeping uncontrollably beside it.

Some Mordvins had come as well, from the village of Shoksha; about twenty of their carts were there, low-slung things, brightly painted but crude — no springs, screeching wooden axles, the horses shaggy but mangy, harnessed in rags and scraps and any old bits of raw leather. The men were a poor, dilapidated crowd to match, with leggings of grey sacking instead of wool, and short quilted jackets, worn and tattered, instead of long coats.

There those horses stood, dropping their heads and pawing the ground dejectedly, while the women sat in the carts and mourned, weeping and wailing and wiping blubbered faces on their sleeves: they were imploring St Nicolas the miracle-worker to take good care of their men, now that the war was

calling them away. There were ikons displayed on some of the carts, and round these the women would make the sevenfold circuit prescribed by custom for such times of tears and prayers; and their men also thumped their chests and roared and wept like a crowd of madmen or drunks.

And St Nicolas looked back at them all, remote and detached in his image; his eyes were glazed and opaque, his face was as round and pink and inhuman as an apple in the spring sun. Only his silver crown, by being tarnished and dull, seemed in keeping with the sorrow of these Mordvin women on this late October day of parting for war. But round and round his ikon they went all the same, for the fifth, the sixth, the seventh time, and then fell on their knees, whole families together, wailing and stretching out their hands to the holy man, stroking the glass of his frame with their finger-tips and then desperately kissing and fondling those same finger-tips so as to draw off the blessing and holiness into themselves. Then came a frenzy of hugging and kissing, while 'Stiringen! Stiringen!' cried the women, calling on their children — left for this day unguarded at home — to be present in spirit at the moment of parting.

Then others again, from Dudnikovo; and these came rowdily, bellowing songs — songs of immeasurable grief, the lamentations of a flock driven out shepherdless into storms and unknown pastures.

Their leading carts were packed with recruits, singing drunkenly and playing guitars and mouth-organs. For years they had chafed under the repression and constraint of the collective farm system; now, suddenly and unexpectedly set loose, they were scared of nobody, and out came all their pent-up resentment, deafeningly. One of them bawled:

'Our own dear fields with our own tears we sow;
But who will have our bones r'

and the refrain followed:

'Ah, who indeed? Ah, who?'

— a pointed question, underlined with a long, high-pitched sob on the mouth-organ.

After the men came the women, in a big hay-wain. They were a colourful lot: the girls wore pleated red dresses with delicate white embroidery and shoulder-ribbons in many colours, while the married women wore ornamental aprons edged with dark material; they wore their hair combed forward and fixed elaborately with wooden clips and white headscarves, so as to give them an odd appearance of having triple-decker foreheads. Last of all in this group came more carts carrying the old men of Dudnikovo; they sat muffled up in sheepskin coats, puffing away at their oak-wood pipes.

By now the village street of Tcngushai was packed with people, but still more came: men of Tartar blood from the village of Atenino. Their dark and slant-eyed women drove off into a narrow lane to one side and made themselves busy there with their ropes and harness and luggage; the young men had already taken off and flung into the carts their great heavy coats of dark brown horse-leather, and now they took off their high leather boots as well and put on leggings and sandals instead. There was no point in taking boots: the State was going to provide uniforms, and if food became difficult a housewife could always trade a pair of boots for rye flour.

The eyes of these Tartar women slanted under broad arching brows; their mouths were fine and sensitive, their complexions pale and delicate, and now, though from time to time their smiles flashed brilliantly, they were silent in the grief of this moment. Their horses too stood motionless, with only an occasional jingle of harness; fine harness here, with good leather and brass studs, and the horses themselves fine bays, high stepping and well-groomed, cocking an ear as they stood there towards the din and confusion in the village street.

One of the Tartars turned in the direction of Atenino, his own village and the place where his forefathers lay buried; his wife Micharifina stood close beside him as he flung himself down three times in farewell prostration before them. Their daughter Fatma was with them: she had come to the sixteenth of her summers in the hayfields, a slender delicate

creature, raven plaits against a swan-white neck: who would look after her now, who could cherish and protect this village beauty in the days of violence? She bent and clung fiercely to her father, head on his shoulder.

The Dudnikovo people were yelling and shouting, and somebody struck up a new song. A man in uniform forced his way through the crowd and called for silence: back at him came a roar of angry derision. 'Sergeant, eh? Nice work! Now you'll have all the women here all to yourself!' 'Ah, take a look at him, what a beauty!' 'You miserable spoilsport, troublemaker, bloodsucker, why can't you let people alone?' — this from a voice bursting with drink — 'why can't you let us poor little fluffy-headed chicks alone?' And: 'There's a fine soldier for you! But look, chum, don't you go crawling to my wife on the stove while I'm away!'

The crowd laughed wildly, here and there hysterically: the man in uniform started to get pushed around, as if accidentally, and in the end he had a hard job of it to get clear of the crowd and dodge into the huts, him with his blue cap and his elegant sash.

People were still arriving, now from Bashkirts, in wicker-work carts with brown horses; these were lumbermen, come from a life of poling great rafts of oak logs down the river Moksha. Then others, from Vitchki-Deyevo, famous wood-workers, who carried light axes around with them wherever they went and did marvels with them, putting up houses of a quite unique sort, beautifully ornamented with relief-work about the windows: a gift which made them much in demand everywhere, even as far afield as Mizhni and Perm. These were the descendants of the men who had built the lovely old wooden churches of Moscow, burnt down during the war against Napoleon; and now, their own houses, and the carved balconies on them! Passers-by stop and stare, thunderstruck, for hours on end! At Vitchki-Deyevo even the wells are encrusted with ornamental woodwork, with birds, flowers, bears' heads.

They were free men, not to be taken lightly, these people

of Vitchki-Deyevo. Sometimes they would leave home for a year on end to work somewhere else, and then come back with armloads of presents for wives and children; nothing ever came of attempts to make them work for the collective farms, even to the extent of paying their own rent: they wouldn't be tied down. And if they did come home for the winter, they would come with vodka and arrange great gargantuan feasts lasting a week; if the manager of the collective farm turned up, they would ply him with drink and pay him what they owed in that way and no other. Great square hefty men, they would swing an axe as easily as a clerk swings his pen, and before that clerk had finished filling in a form they would have finished the rough-hewing of a tree for the saw-mill. They knew the country and its roads and railways and the towns through which this journey was going to take them, and today every single one of them was slightly drunk — not violently drunk, just enough to make them sentimental and affectionate.

Then came fishermen, from Krasni-Yar; they ran to greet their neighbours from Vitchki-Deyevo and Barashovo, with thumping and embracing, and sat down in their carts, leaving their wives to sit and sob and rock to and fro in their own carts, wretched worn-out things. One little woman stood up and wailed dismally into her horse's mane, and every time she paused for breath a great chorus joined in: I'm left, I'm abandoned, no more kindness, no more love! Gloom and misery!

Their husbands joined in, little men, their eyes blue as their own river Moksha. One of them beat his fist against his chest: 'Oh, little brother, why did this have to happen now? — now that the fish are coming up from the sea to pass the winter in our Moksha! We could have salted them up by the barrellful! What a moment, leaving everything just now; oh, it'll be the death of them all, these women, they'll all die. Look how they're carrying on! Well, they've got plenty of good cause.' And his face trembled, and his eyes filled with tears.

One of the men from Vitchki-Deyevo grinned at him: 'You've not been drinking by any chance, have you, friend?'

'Oh, a drop, a little drop; I'm a Russian, we drink all right, but we don't drink ourselves silly over things like this. We just get a bit merry, eh? — a bit light-hearted, wise and clever, a bit less scared, eh? Loosen the old tongue a bit, get it performing, eh? . . .' And his head lurched forward uncontrollably with a great groaning sigh, the fumes of the vodka thudding at his temples.

The men from Maidani were rather late: middle-sized men with bristly beards, flat noses and furrowed brows, famous for a hundred miles round as wood-turners. The dishes they made — brown-lacquered, with yellow flowers and black zig-zag patterns — were on everyone's table; you couldn't sit down to a meal without finding in front of you one of their enormous wooden bowls, big enough to hold a bucketful of soup. All the recruits had wooden spoons tucked into their leggings, ready for the long journey, and these spoons had been made in Maidani. They would tell you in those parts that it was a great mistake to eat from a metal spoon — you'd be liable to burn your mouth. A wooden spoon was the thing for hot food, they said.

This concentration of woodwork instead of farming was a local tradition at Maidani, one of long standing; they did no tilling of the soil beyond the bare minimum needed to keep themselves alive. But they were to be seen at all the fairs in that countryside, offering for sale these spoons and bowls and also colourful but crude wooden toys. This trade took them as far afield as to the Urals, but it brought them in such treasures as salt, rubber boots, and bright materials for their wives and daughters to use for dressmaking.

Now came the turn of the men from Alexandrovno, well-set-up characters with sound boots, fine fur coats and sheep-skin hats. People pointed, commenting in whispers on the well-fed look they had; these were no mere peasants, but the monopolists of the local felt trade, makers of the soft felt-lined boots needed by one and all, and a very substantial

business it was, with the wool needing to be rolled and combed and smoothed and worked for days on end, before the actual making of the boots—always to measure — could begin.

Then, bowed down and silent, came the poor peasants of Kalamasovo, ignored by the rest, their gaunt women stumbling and burdened at their heels, aware of the heavier burdens their husbands would from now on be carrying.

And all the time a scatter of drunken singing, snatches of mouth-organ music, the horses restless and beaten for it, heaven insulted with a steady stream of curses and grumbles: all this until, last of all, this village of Tengushai gave forth its own men to join the crowd. Doors opened heavily, boots clumped on planks and steps, and out they came with their bags and belongings. Everyone had to go: Vassili Molkin the miller, lanky and grey as if with his own flour; his son Yegorka, just eighteen; Vassili Sobolev the manager of the collective farm, his bag at his feet, his face weather-beaten and ruddy; Frolitch Savielov the stableman, dragging after him a great roughly-sewn bag of rawhide. Yegor Prostavilin, assistant bookkeeper to the collective farm, was out there already, looking around sharply and whispering with his elegant wife; he knew what all this was about, as he had been through the first war. Four years as a prisoner, working for a *bauer*, had taught him about the Germans.

‘My God, yes, I’ve seen them!’ he hissed dramatically to the little group round him. ‘These Germans! What people! There’s nothing they can’t do.’

A glum silence at this, until a soldier came by, satchel on his back and papers in his hand, and then the clerk disappeared prudently into the crowd.

Ivan Tchurbassov, who drove a tractor, and Vassili Labzin, who drove a combine harvester, came together; and then the youngsters of seventeen and eighteen turned out, bemused and fuddled after their first attempt at a night of drinking and song. They still had children’s faces, scared of what was to come but full of curiosity about it; they spoke in a broken, gasping way,

as if with a lump in the throat and tears held back with difficulty, until suddenly with no obvious reason they would burst out into curses and blasphemy, laughing, crying, throwing their arms round strangers, dancing a jig, and then utterly collapsing in and among the carts, dull-eyed and done for.

And Menahem came out, stepping reluctantly over the veranda in front of old Ivanovitch's cottage, his landlady and her husband with him; Menahem, so recently swept away from his native Poland and washed up here in Tengushai, still — among these Russians and Mordvins and Tartars — a Jew and an alien. He turned up the collar of his thin black coat, and a black curl fell across his forehead as he turned and for the last time let his intelligent Jewish eyes rest on the cottage, on the bare planks of its walls and the chinks packed with moss.

The two old people looked at him compassionately; he was wearing shabby townsman's clothes and the bag he carried was a skimpy one.

'Poor boy, all on his own!' murmured old Ivanovitch.

'Yes, with all the roads of Russia to get lost in, and no mother and no girl to mourn for him!' And tears welled up in the crow's-feet of old Maria's eyes.

Her husband's beard waggled as if in the wind: he was muttering a prayer for Menahem, the outsider, the wandering stranger whom he had come to feel for as if for his own son. 'Yes, yes, a dreadful thing for all of them!' But the old man's words were lost in the tumult of voices, neighing of horses, jangling of harnesses, bleating of sheep and wailing of mouth-organs, with now and again a sudden agonised shriek from one of the Mordvin women, her face pressed desperately against the hard side of a cart.

There were ikons everywhere by now, hundreds of them, every one of the saints represented, they were old and faded and mouldering, epicene figures in pink and blue, tricked out with coloured paper and bits of glass, framed in tin or unpainted wood. These were old ikons, dating back to the Tsar's time; displayed now on all the farm carts of the countryside under the heavy sky of Tengushai, these holy figures seemed to be

slipping and fading away into the past, as when in autumn men turn away from the harvest fields that have fed them; but at this moment the cry of prayer was still raised before them.

In that crowd of gloomy countrymen and wailing women, among the restless horses and the tangle of carts jamming the road, one tall, narrow-shouldered figure stood out conspicuously: Menahem the foreigner, who had managed — though for so very short a time — to make his home here. He swayed a little, like a sapling in the wind: he blinked restlessly, like a man under stress. He ran his eyes anxiously over the crowd, over so many women in headscarves and men with beards, and let his gaze rest finally on a veranda full of young women in bright dresses.

The whole of Tengushai lay before him, every house visible. Here was the red brick house of the party secretary, and there the army's lime-washed barrack building; further off and less conspicuous were the villagers' wooden huts. Rough pine logs green with moss, poky little windows, wooden tiles on top, yards, cowsheds built against houses, wells fenced in and covered: this was Tengushai as he saw it, encompassed and cloaked in the undulations of its own fields. Very few trees were in sight — only one or two willows, bare and ravaged-looking, at the end of the street — but a trickle of water ran among the cabbage-patches and was lost to view where the village windmills stood among rusty and withered thorn-bushes.

The local people had legends of other waters, of springs so clear and crystalline that you could peer down into them and look God in the eye; Menahem had passed long nights hearing these stories, but now he was leaving these quiet, good-natured people for ever, and never again would he see in the early morning the young Mordvin girls off to their own clear springs, pails swinging. That picture would haunt his memory: the way they used to walk, the slender yoke swinging from their shoulders, a brim-full bucket at either end; their steps elegant, their backs swaying, their slender arms steadying the burden. For this morning journey to fetch water, they used to wear their finest clothes, with lace and embroidery; and often they would

put their full buckets down and call to one another in voices unbelievably musical.

Now, suddenly, silence fell in the road: heads turned, people pressed together. Shut in by the crowd and with their hot breath on his face, Menahem took comfort from the warmth and pressure of humanity; there were men in uniform on the carts now, barking out names from a list, with rough voices answering on all sides. Then silence again, while a soldier made the men clear a space and line themselves up.

‘Nikolai Piotrovitch!’

‘Terentiev Pavlovitch!’

‘Vassili Gavrilovitch!’

‘Kuzma Ivanov!’

As he was called, each man sprang forward, shouldered his pack and fell smartly into line.

Menahem stood still dreamily, as if he heard nothing of this: he was still looking at the houses and the wells and in particular at one small house near the market-place — Lioska’s house. Every day she used to pass Menahem’s window morning and evening on her way to fetch water, and he used to station himself at the window and follow her with his eyes: she always seemed silent and unhappy. A beauty! and a happy, laughing girl everywhere else; but when the time came for her to go by his window, then she would always assume this sad, serious expression. And when they met she would start trembling uncontrollably, so that the pails she was carrying shook and the water slopped out of them more and more onto the road.

‘Ivan Zacharitch!’

‘Tchurbassov!’

And then somebody dug an elbow into Menahem: a vaguely familiar name rang in his ear. Who were they calling now? He felt his heart thumping and his skin reddening in the impatient silence. All eyes were on him, and once again the soldier spelled out:

‘Menahem Issakov!’

‘That’s me!’ he blurted out, anxious not to hear the soldier stumbling again over his odd outlandish name: one Jewish

name; among the countless Russian names called out that day in Tengushai.

Towards evening they started to move off. A few carts went first with the luggage; the recruits marched behind, and their wives crowded along with them in their grief, despite the attempts made by the mounted escort to drive them off. 'All right, that's enough howling — get off back home to the children. You'll be seeing your husbands again: they'll be back as soon as we've kicked the Germans out!'

A single voice struck up a heart-rending song: tears sprang into every eye. Menahem felt his own eyes dried again by the icy evening wind: it cut to the bone, and he pulled his coat tighter about him. They plodded on silently: nobody joined in with the singer.

The silence pressed down like the dark cloud before a storm. They came past the village windmills to where the road forks down towards the bridge over the Moksha. The mills were shut down and locked up, their sweeps broken in the wind, the track leading down to them grown over with weeds.

The carts stopped for a moment: someone tied his bootlaces, a waggoner adjusted his horse's harness. The women flung themselves once again at their husbands, kissing them, clinging feverishly.

Menahem turned for a last look at Tengushai: the familiar blue smoke of evening was curling up from the chimneys, but the village looked faint and unreal. Somewhere a light was shining, but elsewhere a funereal gloom hung over the houses. The family sitting down together at their great table, the samovar set up to hiss and bubble, great dishes brought in with sauerkraut and baked potatoes — there would be none of that tonight. Only the old would be curling up under their sheepskins to sleep on the stoves, alone; and many of them would be praying to the saints, calling down compassion on the suffering world and protection for those who had gone to the war, lest they should be left to die somewhere in the endless immensity of Russia. Holy Mother of God, protect them,

cherish your own children, your own flesh and blood! St Nicolas, worker of miracles, protect our children! O Mary, holier than the holy, protect them! Father almighty, forget not the little lambs of your flock . . .

These people had shared their bread with Menahem the wandering Jew; they had accepted him into their poor homes, given him a sheepskin against the cold, taught him how bast sandals should be worn and how leggings should be strapped. He had cut the hay with them, brought down the pines in their forests and set them floating down the Moksha; he had sat at their tables and eaten as meagrely as they from their own wooden bowls. Tengushai had become his second home, as close to his bones as his own native Polish soil had been.

One of the windmills creaked and turned a little in the wind: a long shadow swung across the undergrowth, the millstone groaned, crows flapped overhead.

'There'll be snow coming. Give it a week.'

'Oh, no!' a young man answered, a little fellow with his hat on one side. 'It'll rain again — look how dark the river locks, like a mirror in the night.'

'The crows are noisy: that's a sign of snow.'

'Yes, but the scrub's crackling: that's a sign of cold and frost.'

From the high ground round the mills Menahem looked once more through the dusk down at the stretch of countryside through which the river Moksha ran dark and shadowy in the evening. On one of its banks the ground was high, with clay soil, and there the local people had their kitchen-gardens; across the river the land was flat and sandy with marshy patches where the grass was especially good for sheep, and miles of pasture encircled by the river and completely covered each year by the spring floods. When summer came the waters subsided, leaving little pools in the folds of the meadows, full of young fish.

The hills on the higher side of the river stood out sharply against the evening sky as Menahem looked round at the hamlets of the neighbourhood. Over there was Bashkirtsi, with a

long line of cottages and, beyond them, the white dome of a monastery, surmounted still by its copper lightning-conductor, though the cross had been taken down after the Revolution and the monastery now served as a granary for the district. Beyond it lay the long village street of Vitchki-Deyevo, and lower down, seeming almost within arm's reach, was Krasni-Yar. Across the bend in the river, it was still possible in the evening light to pick out Kulikovo, Dudnikovo, Atenino where the Tartars lived and the Mordvin villages of Shoksha and Kalamasovo.

Now the men from all these villages were on the march towards the west, heading at present for the Barashovo forests, about twenty-five versts away; from there a light railway crept through the woods to the main-line station at Potma, and through Potma the train to Moscow passed twice a day along the great Moscow-Vladivostok line. This was one of the few lines of communication that still linked the capital with the rest of the country; all the routes to the west had been cut, and along this single line Moscow was receiving arms, soldiers and food, and all that was necessary to keep the city going under the stress of war.

By the time the front ranks were moving again, the low meadows on the far side of the river were dark already, though there was still light on the high ground. They went over the suspension bridge; it squeaked and groaned under their feet, the planks trembled and heaved: the whole thing was low-built and partly under water. The women stayed on their own side, waving their scarves beneath the windmills and calling names dear to them into the emptiness of night.

'Kuzma-a-a a! Kuzma-a-a-a!'

And a shape emerged momentarily from the dark throng, pulled off his hat and waved it: 'Ko-o-olka-a-a!'

Like doves the white scarves fluttered, hundreds of doves over the Moksha. Hearts were heavy with dull blind grief.

Menahem took off his hat and waved it high in the October evening towards the villages and the group of women. Suddenly he heard a cry: a woman's voice, sharp and high, came over the river and rolled across the fields.

'Misha-a-a!' Lioska: it was her voice, and that was the name she had whispered to him one evening, finding 'Menahem' strange-sounding and hard on her tongue. 'Misha: that comes more naturally, doesn't it? I shall call you Misha.'

'Misha-a-a!' And there she was now with all the others on the river-bank, waving a white scarf for him. How could he possibly have missed her among all those people during the day?

Once, twice and again her voice echoed, coming at him from every direction, ringing in his ears. Had he imagined it? No, it was real, his own name, and it seemed like a voice from his own home, though it came from Tengushai. So it changed him: he suddenly felt no longer a lonely exile but now one of these peasants, his destiny linked with theirs, himself one of them.

In front the road stretched, straight and sandy. A hand touched his shoulder gently: 'Come, friend: let's get moving. We've got to get to Alexandrovno, six versts from here that is; that's where we're going to sleep.' Menahem turned and saw Frolitch Saviclov, the man who looked after the horses on the collective farm, anxious now to help the stranger and make him feel less lonely. Frolitch knew this country, every track and path of it, every hamlet and ' it: he saw Menahem as a foreigner with an odd accent, a thin fellow, feeble perhaps: how would he manage, would he survive the endless march across Russia that lay ahead of them?

'Take it easy, friend, you'll be all right with our lads: we Russians aren't bad to foreigners.'

They moved on, and Frolitch gave Menahem a hand with his pack, which was hanging loose: he tightened the straps and hoisted the whole pack well up. 'Don't carry it low-down, that's no good: pull it well up onto both shoulders, that's the way. You might think it doesn't matter — well, it does: this way, it isn't going to dig into your sides so much.'

Then silence, with only the sound of shoes scuffling through the sandy earth; till someone lit a cigarette with flint and steel, and another called out: 'Gerasim, give us a smoke! My own

tobacco's stuck right at the bottom of my bag.' Then two shadows leaning together in the dark, two faces lit up momentarily in a tiny flare. Thick night came down over the Moksha, and the crows which had been flapping along with the recruits turned back for home.

Frolitch walked with Menahem, keeping him company and pointing out the different places they passed. 'You see the pale patch in that field? That's the Blind Eye: it's a pond really, but that's what we call it, because there's a sort of film over it all the time, like the wet on a window-pane. And those are the Pope's Fields all round it.'

'Why are they called that?' Menahem asked.

The stableman leant towards him and spoke quietly. 'Those fields used to belong to the monastery at Tennikovo. A fine monastery that was, I can tell you. The Tsar went there once. There were two sections of it, one part for men and one for women, fifteen versts apart; and when the place was shut down, what d'you think they found? A tunnel! Yes, it went all the way from where the monks lived to the holy nuns' place: I saw it myself. They must have been fine fellows! Fancy digging a tunnel like that, just to get at the girls!' His little slanting eyes glowed with ironic amusement.

Frolitch felt quite at home here, going into the night with all these others. Everyone was going to the war: he was going too: it couldn't be helped. Four things were marked out by the heavens as part of man's destiny: to choose a woman, to go off to the wars, to beget children and then to die. That was the will of God.

Frolitch Savielov had a hut near the stable-yard of the collective farm: they were large spacious stables. People envied him: a lucky fellow. His chickens looked after themselves, pecking around the stables and eating corn and horse-manure indiscriminately; and every Sunday his wife took baskets full of lovely eggs to market.

'You see that field over there? That's the one they call The Hat.'

'You go in for odd names in Tengushai!'

'The Hat's what they call it because years ago somebody found a hat there.'

'And when would that be?'

'Well, I heard about it from my grandfather. We like to give all the fields different names in our village, so that if anybody says "They're ploughing The Hat today", everybody knows what it means; or if he says "I'm digging by the Blind Eye", well, just the same. Ah, those were the days, my boy. My stables are empty now. Some of the horses were taken for the army, some of them died on their feet, and the ones left over are no good. They've only got straw to eat, and that goes straight through them, no good at all. And I ask you, what can you do with land like ours at Tengushai if you haven't got horses? The land needs to feel horses working it, not those tractors. Where you've got a horse mucking onto the fields, that's where you get the grass up to your waist. But where you've got those tractors spoiling the land, you won't get any grass at all, nothing.'

Frolitch scowled. Nobody cared twopence for horses! People used to sneak into the stables at night and steal the oats and bran out of the mangers, and then they would cover their tracks by smearing a bit of bran round the horses' mouths, as if they had been eating. What could you do with devils like that? But then, you didn't want to see people starving as well as horses. It was altogether too much for Frolitch: he could not bear to see his horses suffering: already they could hardly stand up, and before long they would have to be given for meat to the Tartars of Atenino. That was why there were fields unploughed and weeds everywhere, whole meadows full of weeds, so that the womenfolk would have to harvest the weeds and make some sort of bread that way, and then they and their children would be writhing and groaning with pain afterwards as they lay on the stoves at night. This year there hadn't been any rye or oatmeal given out in Tengushai, not a scrap; the granaries were empty; what harvest there had been hardly came up to the amount exacted by the government.

All things considered, Frolitch felt it no bad thing to be

going away. He had hoarded a cellarful of potatoes for his family out of the very fine crop his own garden had produced; he had pickled several barrels of cabbage; his wife had been stocking up with wood all through the summer: he had been determined to provide his family with something to eat, however little. As for himself, he would always be able to lighten the burden by leaving home if necessary: this would be nothing new, since work had already taken him as far afield as Perm. After all (Frolitch felt) was there any place where his people hadn't gone at one time or another to earn their bread? The whole of Russia was their home! So he argued, to cheer himself up.

At the moment of leaving his home he had paused at the front door and turned to meet the eyes of his four fair-headed children: Vanyushka, the eldest, had jumped down off the stove and run out to the middle of the garden. 'Do as your mother tells you; and when I come back . . .' He had not been able to finish the sentence: there was a lump in his throat and his eyes were wet. He had closed the door abruptly and gone, not turning round for shame that they should see his tears, even though his wife was wringing her hands and calling to him. Afterwards he had seen her among the women who waved farewell across the Moksha, but she had not shouted or called him by name: hers was the peasant's love, solid and true, stormy at times, love like the silent deep feeling between the peasant and his fields.

Alexandrovno was dark, no lights had been lit. The recruits halted in the village street, between houses that seemed to squat low in the night. A long beam creaked as someone drew up water from a shallow well, and down the village a dog barked. It was a bare street, with no fences or trees: the wind whistled all round, unimpeded, and the chill and damp of it on their faces weighed the men's spirits down, making them heavy-footed and slow to speak. Some of them collapsed onto the damp ground and rested against their packs, until a soldier came up on a horse and ordered them into the houses to get warm.

Lights began to show in a few windows; the soldiers struck flint and lit tapers, and some pulled home-made candles from their packs. One man sat down and started cutting long spills of pine-wood, to be burnt over a pail so that the sparks would fall into the water.

Bearded countrymen, bareheaded and in dark shirts open at the neck, gave up to the newcomers their warm places on top of their stoves and stood by, silent and barefoot; their wives, turning and stirring on straw mattresses in their cubicles, called out through the partitions in motherly voices, 'Oh, little ones, where are they taking you? Where are you off to, my treasures?'

'Don't worry, ma!' a soldier would answer. 'We'll have them out, these Germans.'

Not reassured, the old women went on sighing and muttering to themselves until the light was put out. 'They took mine, too. Ah, ah!'

Menahem, pausing in a doorway, took his hat off and looked around: his long thin shadow sloped across the walls. Men were stretched out all over the floor. On a chest in the right-hand corner of the room were a number of ikons, with a little red lamp flickering faintly in front of them, there was a candle burning on a shelf beside the stove, and a man was busy with an awl, mending his sandals by its light.

'Haven't you found a place? There's room here, plenty of room: get your bag off.' This was Vassili Labzin of Tengushai. 'Go on, get some sleep!' he went on kindly. 'We've a long way to go yet. We're used to it, but you aren't.'

Menahem sat down on the floor, rested his head on his pack and covered himself up with his coat. The candle-flame guttered, as if it were going out: Labzin leant across and trimmed the wick, the flame lighting up his broad freckled face, his prominent cheekbones.

'It's not burning well: the air's too thick in here,' he muttered; through the wall came the groanings and complaints of an old woman. The men were snoring: some were lying barefoot, some had loosened their leggings and shoes, some had stretched out just as they were.

Alexandrovno lay silent. Even the dog at the other end of the village had stopped barking. Occasionally a sad bleating came from a shed nearby: it went on late into the night.

'Must be a ewe,' said Labzin. 'She ought to be brought indoors, it's a wicked cold night. The old girl must be asleep, otherwise she'd hear it. Everything'll be up the creek, with the men gone.' But still the old woman kept moaning behind her partition.

The half-moon shone into the room, and the silence grew deeper. The candle went out, and the complaints of the ewe outside stopped, after one last choked whimper.

'The sky's clearing. Fine day tomorrow.'

'No — at this time of year the half-moon means cold and snow.' And Labzin curled up like a dog and fell asleep at once, the sound sleep of a healthy man.

Only Menahem was restless. He turned over and over; he stared at the low ceiling, the little window, the moon; he turned to the God of his fathers, praying for strength to endure the long march across the vastness of Russia and then to face without flinching that enemy who was now striding like a giant towards Moscow. Give me grace and blessing, under these strange and alien skies! Protect these men, my brothers, and show them the strong arm of Thy justice!

In the first grey light of dawn the soldiers who formed their escort came and chivvied up the recruits. One of them galloped up and down the village street, and with this dull thudding of hooves came his voice, hoarse and hollow-sounding; then other voices, peasant voices, bemused and grumbling, and a scuffling of boots on rough boards. Many of the men were still sitting on the floor, head in hands, staring dully, dazed and bewildered that they were not waking up at home, comfortable on their own stoves and under their own sheepskins. What were they doing in these unfamiliar surroundings, sleeping on the cold floor of a stranger's house, with a sack for a pillow?

Blue sky shone through the windows. Soon it would be time for snow and sleighs for bringing in the cut wood piled up in the



forests. It wouldn't be necessary to keep to the roads: the horses could then be driven straight across the frozen Blind Eye and down across The Hat, halving the distance. . . . But there was a war on, and everyone was going to it.

Once again the old grannie in her cubicle took up her moaning. 'Where will they take you, my dears, my poor little boys? God have mercy on His own children!'

Huskily, someone struck up a waggoners' song, beating time with his foot: 'Mother, oh mother, why did you bear me?'

Suddenly the door of the hut in which Menahem had been sleeping was flung open, and an icy wind cut through the room. 'Come on, my lucky lads! Up and be heroes!' A booted and spurred figure was kicking them up, with a torrent of obscenities, up and out into the road, while the sleepier ones were still tying up their boots. Everywhere there were fires and smoke, and water put on to boil. 'Clever as monkeys, aren't they? Fires already!'

The water was being boiled up in tins and pails; men crowded round to get warm, throwing dry twigs and branches to crackle cheerfully in the flames. Some of them went to the wells and washed, standing half-naked in the early morning cold and flinging buckets of ice-cold water over themselves.

The sun rose over Tengushai, and already the three windmills could be seen, high on the bank of the Moksha and silhouetted against the sky.

The men scattered and spread themselves to eat, some at bare tables in the village huts, some on floors or plank verandas, some out in the road, leaning against walls. Each man had his pack at hand, and took bread out of it, and bits of bacon previously cut up small with a knife and kept in a cloth; some drank milk from bottles, some just had black bread with salt. They handled their bags and fires like men accustomed to the situation and thoroughly at home; everything had its place, the spoon tucked into the leggings, the knife strung to the belt, the water-bottle hooked onto the pack. They kept their tobacco close at hand, together with

flint and tinder; many of them kept a pair of spare shoes at their belts.

'One jump now, all the way to Moscow. They won't see us here for a cloud of dust.'

They laughed, mouths full.

'Snow won't be too bad. Better than autumn mud.'

In the early light needles of ice could be seen forming in the water; there was hoar-frost here and there. The forest of Barashovo was hidden in dark mist; this would lift before long, revealing the sombre outline of the woods, running in a semi-circle round the village. It was only twelve versts to Barashovo; their train was to go in the afternoon, and they ought to have plenty of time to get there and then to light fires and warm themselves.

Labzin came up and took Menahem by the arm. 'Come and get warm by the fire. Sit down; you'll see how we Russians get things organised, a crafty lot, we are!'

Vassili was bending over the little fire, feeding dry branches into it; his face was pock-marked, as if it had been hammered roughly into shape. He offered Menahem a mug of hot tea.

'Go on, take it; warm yourself up.'

The mug itself was a comfort to Menahem's hands, and the warmth of the tea spread through him.

'Thank you, Vassili,' he stammered. 'Thank you.'

'You come from a long way off?'

'Oh yes, a very long way.'

'And you're called Menahem, are you? That's a funny name: wouldn't "Mikhail" be more like it?'

'All right,' Menahem answered. 'Let it be Mikhail, then.'

'Why aren't you eating?'

'I can't: it's too early.'

'I suppose you mean you haven't got anything?' And Vassili started untying his pack.

'No, thank you, please don't bother; I've got my own bag.'

After that morning, Labzin kept alongside Menahem whenever they were on the march.

It was broad daylight by the time they left Alexandrovno. Their route took them through long hayfields, very incompletely mown: much of the hay had been left to spoil, for want of men to cut it. Here and there they saw wretched-looking haystacks, badly made, lop-sided, amateurish, sure to collapse, so that the hay would be scattered by the wind and rotted by the snow. The young men who knew how to do the job properly had gone when the war began; now the barrel was being scraped, the last men taken.

'They ruined the pastures round Tengushai,' said Molkin the miller. 'They made us cut the hay before it was ripe. These collective farm managers, they're all the same, they want to be Heroes of Soviet Labour, so they have to fulfil their blasted norms regardless.'

No-one made any comment. This was not because of any caution or lack of interest: they were all feeling that now, at last, they were able to speak freely if they felt so minded.

Menahem remembered the incident well. It had happened early in the summer, while the fields around Tengushai were still green, with a few little yellow flowers in places. In another two or three weeks there would be a fine carpet of hay, ready for mowing. But then one morning the managers had come round before sunrise, knocking at all the windows and shouting 'Come on! Haymaking time! Bring out your scythes and whetstones!' Nothing could be done about it: orders were orders. A long line of bearded peasants formed up along one side of the green hayfield: the morning sun caught their scythes, dazzlingly. Then came the order: 'Start mowing!' They raised their scythes as one man, then stopped and stood motionless for a moment, as though frozen. Off came their hats. down on their knees they fell, asking God's forgiveness for the sin of mowing an unripe field. The sin lay in not waiting until the blossom had fallen and the wind had scattered the seeds: this field would now be impoverished for a generation, its grass would be miserable stunted stuff, overrun with wormwood and

other weeds. Knowing this, the mowers still moved methodically across the field, shedding no tears to water the assaulted grass. Menahem thought of the dew that fell on these fields, seeing it as God's tears.

They marched in groups, the men of each village still keeping together. The men from Barashovo went in front; they were the lucky ones, they would be seeing their homes again soon, and would be able to take leave of their families once more and re-stock themselves with food. The Mordvin men came next, all in a great state of breathlessness because of the heavy packs they carried; their clothes were heavy and stifling, their shoes were ragged, with laces tangled and broken. Then came the Tartars, in long brown coats; they were a taciturn lot, with eyes flickering coldly. The Tengushai men kept away from them, not caring to strike any closer acquaintance. The Mordvin men had honest open faces, but always with a touch of peasant craftiness to them: they would steal if they got the chance, but they were quite capable also of complete generosity and unselfishness when the occasion arose. 'Take it,' they would say. 'Mordva is good! Mordva is every man's brother!' In the mornings they would call polite greetings across at one another, waving their hats; and they would dash across from one file to another when they were on the march, handing out tobacco and cigarettes. Just now they were very cheerful to find themselves still on familiar roads: everybody knew the Barashovo road, every yokel had been along here at one time or another.

Among all these groups, one outsider. Menahem looked round, wide-eyed: the fields, clouds, lakes of Russia were reflected in his eyes. There was low scrub alongside the bare road; further off, a single pine tree was visible. Now the grass became scantier, and sand-dunes appeared in the distance; then, all at once, they had come to the Barashovo forest. It spread through the valley in front of them, they were right on top of it.

The recruits were under the care of a military escort, and this in turn was under the command of Dimitri Pavlovitch Nalogin, who was Party Secretary for the Tengushai region.

He came riding up now on a very well-fed horse, giving orders to the soldiers.

'There's a beast who doesn't go short of oats!'

'Look at his coat! Like a mirror.'

'*They* don't go short of horses!'

That spring, when the time had come to plough their own holdings, the women had been harnessed five to a plough, with a man to guide the plough over the potato fields. That had been the only way to get their land tilled, with no horses; and it had to be done, if they were going to survive the winter.

'Good Lord, *him*?' asked the stableman. 'Is *he* going off to the war too?'

'No, he's only going with us as far as Barashovo.'

'These soldiers, they'll see everybody else off, and then stay behind themselves.'

'They've got good arrangements, all right. Nobody's going to touch them.'

Nalogin turned suddenly to face them. 'Hey, my lads, how do you feel?'

'Not bad, Dimitri Pavlovitch,' they called back; 'and yourself?' But as he fell in behind to follow them on his horse, the cheerful noise among them died down, and they went on in an uneasy silence.

Nalogin was about forty years old, short and broad-shouldered, with small narrow eyes and pouchy cheeks. He came from peasant stock at Temnikov. This was his third year at Tengushai: he lived in the two-storey red-brick house which had belonged in the old days to a business man called Frolin, who used to collect the tolls at the bridge over the Moksha. He had been the only kulak in Tengushai: the land there had been held in common for generations, and every twenty years it was shared out anew according to the number of mouths to be fed in each family — women and girls not being counted. When the day of the collective farms dawned, there were no land-owners to be expropriated: all that had to be done was to transfer the land, already shared out, from the village community to the collective farm.

Nalogin gave the orders in Tengushai and all the villages in the district. Every day he studied the leading article in *Pravda*, and governed his administration accordingly: these articles were his orders of the day, and whatever they might dictate — the delivery of firewood to the authorities, the provision of grain on a scale previously laid down — Nalogin would dutifully perform. He knew country people, and was able to manage them and speak their language; he made his presence felt in the village, but discreetly, and kept himself well informed about the farm work and everything else that went on in the locality.

‘What are you all looking like that for? This isn’t a funeral! Come on, sing up!’

He reined his horse in alongside Menahem, opened the slit of his right eye, and looked suspiciously at this outsider among his people. Menahem looked up, and their eyes met.

‘You from Tengushai?’ the Party Secretary asked abruptly, after a moment’s thought. He spoke not directly at Menahem, but as if to someone else, several places on, and of course he knew quite well that this group consisted only of men from Tengushai. He felt unsettled before Menahem’s raised head and open gaze, unwilling to address this stranger directly; he was not used to meeting this kind of sharp and lively eye among the yokels. Here, he reflected, was someone different — the kind of fellow who can read and write.

Menahem was aware that the Party Secretary had come up for a look at him. But the encounter only lasted a moment, Nalogin galloping off when a soldier came up with a message.

By now they had reached the forest. Around its borders were low twisted bushes and old pines with split and pitted trunks; there was thick grass of a dull silvery colour, bristling and spiky, and everywhere a carpet of dead leaves; a strange greenish light shone round the overgrown tracks of the forest, tracks once intended to parcel the forest out into sections, but now vanishing under the grass and brambles, the fallen pine-trees that lay everywhere, many of them thick with moss.

A hut, and an old man coming out of it: an old woman

gathering firewood. Dry twigs crackling under the men's feet as they went on.

Soon they would be at Barashovo, where the big collective granaries and potato-cellar were: some of the men came from this forest and were now once again at home. From Barashovo there ran a light railway, curling through the woods to join the main line to Moscow: a miniature train ran backwards and forwards along this line with rye from the farms, hay from the meadows, timber from the woods, cattle. Here to Barashovo the wagons would come, heavily loaded; here the horses, cattle and sheep would be brought by the men who had reared and tended them. But now, and for a long time, it would be the turn of the men themselves.

Frolitch remembered one of his anecdotes. 'There used to be an old fellow living in Tengushai: Frolov Lushkin they called him. He told me once that somewhere in the Bible it said how the world was going to get completely destroyed, one day.'

Vassili Molkin leaned across and hissed: 'Yes, that's right! That's how it is! People pile up iron and stone for themselves, stone and iron, and those are things that have to be paid for in blood! I heard that myself from a beggar, a real holy man. He used to go round the country and cry out "Oh, my brothers in Christ, beware of iron! beware of stone! Where there's iron and stone there's going to be tears and bloodshed!"'

'Ah, yes, it's all very true!'

Somebody sang:

'I've left my dear wife and my home far behind;
Oh Russia, dear Mother, what fate shall I find?'

They came to Barashovo, made at once for the handful of houses and barns there, and snatched a quick meal, though the narrow-gauge train was not due to arrive until midnight.

Fires, newly lit, blazing up in those small shabby houses: a candle-flame wavering in a window: rooms full of smoke, air heavy with sweat and the smell of damp leggings, now stripped

off and strung up to dry over dark pinewood rafters: gouts of resin oozing out and crawling down the walls.

Everywhere, in each house, the recruits sat down around the stove and along the wooden bench in front of it, their boots and wraps stuffed underneath. There was a big copper samovar smoking on every table and pots and pails around every stove; wherever Menahem looked in, pausing for a moment in the open door, he would be engulfed in a cloud of steam so that he could hardly see. Already he had gone half-way down the village street like this without finding anywhere to sleep: as soon as he opened a door, angry voices would shout out from inside 'Shut that door! Don't let the cold in!' But he could see nobody, nor could he recognise any of the voices.

The smoke and steam in the huts dazed him; he felt sick and giddy. Outside it was dark and cold, a black tarry night, not even one's own shadow visible; a damp wind came howling in from the forest spaces, streaming among the trees, slapping away in the night, sending showers of sparks up from the low chimneys of the village.

But at one hut a shout greeted him when he opened the door. 'Is that you, Mikhail? Come in and sit down!'

It was Vassili Labzin. Menahem dropped the pack off his shoulder and took off his cap.

'What might you be doing, chasing around in the dark?' Labzin's leathery face and the dark mop of his hair were glistening with sweat.

'I wanted to sleep in the barn, but it's too cold; it's arctic.'

This hut too was full of steamy mist and men snoring. Menahem peered, and was able to recognise them as his eyes became accustomed to the sweaty haze. One man was stretched out almost in the doorway, his head flung back, hair down over his face, his chest rising and falling like a bellows as he breathed heavily; another sat cross-legged, arms folded in front of him, head dropped forward and showing only a tangle of hair; another lay sprawled against the table, knees drawn up, hands on his head, his mouth open and dribbling, looking like a corpse, or as if he had been knocked out in a street fight. There

was another who had rolled himself into a ball like a hedgehog, so that nothing showed of him but a pile of dark clothes, rising and falling regularly; and there was a pale boy of about eighteen, whose childish mouth, just shadowed with down, twisted and pouted as though with the effort of holding back tears.

Menahem could not sleep, though the cold and the ache left him and sensation returned to his finger-tips. Wearily he closed his eyes, rocking to and fro on his haunches, and the old obsession hammered away inside his skull: 'How can I stop being different and become like these men, sleeping at their ease all night? How can I face the music, put up with it all? At this very moment, in Poland, blood, my own people's blood . . . I must be tough, active, not just a passenger; with all the others, not wandering off, not collapsing half-way there . . . Oh, God, God, give me strength to get there and face the enemy in battle!'

And as the night went on, a vision took possession of him, a feeling of being back at home in his own birthplace — either now at this moment, or else in some kind of return to the past, he could not say which. There it all was: the market square and the four roads of that little Jewish town on the river Vokra, a town of small tradesmen, of tailors and cobblers, grocers and nurserymen, a place of cherry orchards and lilac gardens. Here on one side was the low tiled roof of the leather-workers' quarter, over there was the synagogue with its courtyard where old men used to sell pigeons, and across by the pump in the middle of the square the market porters were dozing and snoring in the sun. Old Ponta was squatting up on a roof, busy with his flock of pigeons; there was a hawk swinging in the cloudless blue overhead, ready to swoop down among them. People on their way to afternoon prayers paused to watch. 'Look up there, look at that hawk!' Windows opened and girls looked out apprehensively, long hair swishing, dark eyes staring at the young man who smiled up at them from the road, a book under his arm but a bird of prey if ever there was one. Watch out, girls!

Then or now, now or then? But here she was, an old country-woman, sitting on the edge of her stove and moaning, burdened with the loneliness of the nights; before long the very last of the men would be going, and no letters had come from her husband; life was hard and her head ached with it.

Vassili Labzin woke up, shoulders against the stove. 'Look, mother, you're all right. You're going to stay safe and warm in your hut!'

'I'd rather go with you lot. Oh, I'd like to be able to fly, I would!'

'When did your husband get taken?'

'Right at the beginning.'

She rocked backwards and forwards on the stove, her red nightgown swinging loose, her hair dishevelled and undone. 'Maybe you'll run into him while you're fighting the Germans. You tell him we're just about finished here. He's a short fellow, with a black wart on his right cheek — Volodya they call him, and his family name's Zakharitch.'

'Zakharitch, eh?' Labzin repeated, shifting a little closer to the stove. 'Well, my old dear, you know what they say, don't you? — how all the first lot of recruits got killed? Your Zakharitch, he may have been killed, or he may be a prisoner.'

The old woman wrung her hands miserably.

'I'll look out for him,' Labzin promised. 'Perhaps I'll come across him.' He sniffled noisily. 'Now don't be silly, don't cry your eyes out. Yes, there is a war on; but you just look after your house, you just stay alive, see?' He had his elbows on the stove now. 'But what I'd like would be to warm my old bones right on top of this stove, instead of lying on the floor and freezing!'

She edged away. 'Not so much of that, now! Your eyes aren't looking so cold.'

And when Menahem woke up he heard Labzin whispering on top of the stove. 'Look, stupid, he won't come back, nobody will. When I come back, I'll look you up, so help me I will! I'll come straight to you and we'll start up our own home,

honest to God we will: I'll come straight like a bird on my little wings!'

Then silence. Someone cried out in his sleep; a cat howled miserably outside, trying to get in, until a man rose barefoot, sending black shapes of shadow across the walls and the stove. The door creaked and the caterwauling stopped, and something soft and smooth poured itself in and onto the stove, sending some metal object clattering down. A hoarse country voice spoke in the dark: 'There'll be a frost: the cat's crawled onto the stove.'

And again all these people were lost in silence. Each one prayed secretly for the night to go on for ever, for the train to come as late as possible and at any rate not before dawn. One man rubbed his eyes, half asleep, and groped for the window, but failed to find it in the dark.

The train came just before dawn, several hours late, and the recruits came out to the wooden building by the line.

In the carriages it was dark and close. Boards and sheets of metal had been nailed over the windows, and only a very faint light came in through chinks and holes; smoke and sparks from the wood-burning engine enveloped the train, suffocatingly. When daylight came, the men were able to squint out through the chinks and holes: a great stretch of cut forest met their eyes, roughly cleared land, deeply pitted and with many tree-stumps, some of them throwing out new growth and attempting to live again. Among this scrub, wisps of smoke rose from the hearths of the villas.

Menahem walked restlessly up and down by the rails. Several men in army caps and quilted tunics were at work around the primitive station buildings, which were packed full of people: they were penned in like cattle, on the steps, on the floors, everywhere, crowded against one another, tangled up with their packs and parcels. One voice rose above the din and confusion: a little old man with a wild look, hook-nosed and wearing glasses, tore off his jacket, beat his breast with a bony claw, and howled.

'What's the matter with him?'

'Somebody's pinched his bag.'

Menahem went over to the old man. 'Cheer up, dad; don't cry!'

The old man had a shrivelled bird-like face: his Adam's-apple jumped up and down as he spoke, and his lips quivered, cracked and blue.

'Young man, they've taken my last bit of bread and my last rouble! How am I going to get to Leningrad?'

'Have you got relations there?'

'A daughter.'

'Where do you come from?'

The old man lowered his voice and looked cautiously around him. 'From the Temlag! They've let me out.'

'What's the Temlag?'

'Ah, I can see you're a foreigner! You're not a Russian! Take a look round you, laddie. You see these forests, these clearings? All this country, hundreds of versts of it? That's what they call the Temlag, the Temnikov prison camps. There's camps all round here, in lonely places, barbed wire all round, bogs and marshes everywhere. Well, just now they've started turning the prisoners out as fast as they can and sending them to the war, and to the coal-mines in the Urals too.'

The old man dropped his hand in a gesture of resignation. He was shivering.

'Cover yourself up, dad: get that jacket on again. You'll see your daughter all right. Here, take this.' And Menahem offered him a loaf and a few roubles. 'Go on, grandpa, take them! I won't need them now, we're off to the front!'

The old man crossed himself and took his glasses off, a ramshackle pair of glasses mended with bits of wire and now misted over. He wiped the lenses and tried to say something, but people came by and he kept silent.

Then a soldier came up and asked Menahem who he was.

'I'm a recruit.'

'Where from?'

'Tengushai.'

'Then get onto the train, and look sharp! And nobody's to get out.'

Menahem started to look for his friends from Tengushai, anxious not to be parted from them. Another draft had just turned up, blundering along on foot between the rails, the men bent beneath their heavy packs and muttering to one another.

At the very end of the train, in the last carriage, Menahem found Frolitch the stableman and Molkin the miller with his son Yegor: the whole carriage was full of familiar faces, all from Tengushai, and they squeezed up to make room for Menahem.

Frolitch was telling a story, one with a moral, very relevant to their own village, their own fields and woods.

'When two moles meet each other in those tunnels they dig, one of them's got to die: then the winner takes over the whole lot, all the tunnels together. But don't go getting the idea that they just rush at each other as soon as they meet! Not a bit of it. They dig out a special room for fighting in, not the tunnel itself, that's too narrow, a special room, nice and spacious; and they work together while they're making it, friendly-like. Then, when they've got the battlefield ready, then battle commences. . . . It's true, I'm telling you! Ask the old people! I've seen the places myself, you can tell them easily! When you're going across a field and you see molehills, you often see one of them much bigger, three times as big as the others, that's the place: under that molehill there's been one of these fights. And us men, I reckon we could learn a thing or two from moles; yes, we could. Our way is to jump on the other bloke without any warning, in the middle of the night, and get strangling at once.'

'True, Frolitch, very true!' the recruits all murmured.

A bottle of home-brew appeared from somebody's pack and went round: each man took a pull or two and then passed it to his neighbour, wiping the neck of the bottle with the back of his hand before he drank.

The miller got out a big loaf, spread a cloth under it, and

began to cut chunks and offer them round. 'Help yourselves, my friends, help yourselves.'

Soboliev the farm manager took a piece of bacon out of a white linen bag, cut it carefully into even parts, and passed them round. After that they all wiped the crumbs out of their beards and whiskers, and undid their overcoats and jackets, and combed their hair with their fingers. (Many of them had pudding-basin haircuts, done with the big shears used for the sheep.)

There was a jolt as the engine was re-coupled to the train, then it started to move, and soon they had left Barashovo, leaving a thick cloud of smoke behind them. Sparks from the engine streamed continuously past the train, flaring up and disappearing, and fragments of hot ash rattled against the outside: the wheels drummed heavily, the carriages swayed, the metal sheets over the windows rattled in the wind.

One man in the corner spread out a pack of cards — a pack which had monks instead of kings and pictures of the Virgin (copied from ikons) instead of queens.

'I'll read the cards for you: sit down.' He bent closely over his spread of cards, muttering. 'I see a long voyage, a meeting with someone very important, trouble, some sort of official building, a girl with big eyes, very fair, she'll tell you something; it'll make you unhappy.'

The fortune-teller seemed depressed, suddenly. 'There's a wicked card keeps turning up: it's bad luck you know! Oh my dear friends, it looks like disaster!'

The little grey man he was speaking to tapped his foot impatiently. 'Come on, Vanyushka, don't keep us in suspense: tell us the truth!'

'But I've told you everything! It's just that bad card pushing in all the time!'

The little man's forehead was sweating feverishly: he wiped it with his sleeve, and then someone pushed him out of the way. 'That's enough, let somebody else have a go.'

And every time a card was turned, Menahem heard Vanyushka's high-pitched lucid pronouncements: meetings, tears,

misfortunes, official buildings, a woman in black, tears, more tears.

'Hey, look, Vanyushka, what sort of cards have you got there? Shuffle them up a bit, can't you? You're not telling us anything but the horrors! You've got a bad hand, that's what you've got. There must be some way of telling better fortunes than that!'

But nobody listened to Frolitch: each man sank back into his private despair, except for one who stood, his back against the boarded-up window, and stared heavily at Vanyushka, seeing tears in the corners of the fortune-teller's eyes. The little grey man had thrown his head back and shut his eyes.

'Well, Vanyushka; aren't you going to tell my fortune?' Menahem asked.

'Better not, Mikhail: not a good thing.'

The day went on, grey and gloomy. A faint grey illumination came through the cracks and holes in the walls, filtered through the dense smoke that curled incessantly round and over and through the train, lifting momentarily when the wind blew and revealing bleak stretches of barren fen, with stacks of pine-logs, rotten and half-buried in grass. Occasionally the darkness in the carriage became total for a while, as the train went through a patch of thick forest, with trees and undergrowth closing in on both sides of the track; and then the pale light would return waveringly, patterning the recruits' faces. Peering out, one could occasionally glimpse a group of men on some forest path: grey figures in tattered and threadbare coats, their feet wrapped in sacking or cloth; mere stumps of old timber, stripped and forgotten long ago; featureless men, shreds and patches of life still flickering in bundles of old rag.

'Who are they?'

'Don't ask, Mikhail. Never ask questions!' said Frolitch, by the hole in the window. 'Those are Russian citizens, those are: they're just off to their work. . . . Those are the Temlag men!'

Menahem sat down, head in his hands. He felt feverish, upset by the clangour of the train and the rattling of the tin

window-sheets, beaten down as if by a heavy stone, a deluge of heavy stones. This is too much, he thought, the burden's too heavy. Frolitch, Vassili — help me, give me air, I can't breathe!

He stayed there on the floor, panting, half-stunned by so many days' continual stress; occasionally he gave a shuddering sigh, drowned by the hooting and roaring of the engine. He slept restlessly and was troubled for the first time with nightmares on this the third day out from Tengushai. It was a collapse rather than a real sleep: he never lost awareness of his surroundings, the rattle of the train and the talk and agitation among the men, but all this seemed quite unconnected with himself. The cold, the uneasy light on those corpse-like faces in the forest, the train — he seemed miles away, and these things became mere images or diagrams. At any moment now, he felt, the darkness would lift, and he would find himself back in the green country beside the Vokra; there would be a herd of cows dawdling along the lane, gleams of sunset reflected in the little windows of home, all the colour of a Polish evening teasing his painter's eye, his brush chasing its richness, flickering like a clover field under night breezes.

But then the train jolted and stopped rowdily, the men staggered and fell over one another, doors were flung open, light crashed in onto grey faces, grey bodies, grey baggage; strange men came in with lanterns, trampling on the recruits as they made out loud a count of their numbers.

One man shouted: 'Don't tread on us like that, you great blind carthorse!'

'Who said that?'

'I did! You big shit-house!' It was the little grey man, the one for whom the fortune-teller had foreseen trouble.

The other man — he was wearing a fur cap with a star in front — brought his lantern up close to see who was complaining. The little peasant took off his own hat and rubbed his eyes and scratched his head and bent down as if he was looking for something, and then suddenly butted his head up as hard as he could into the official's stomach. The big man crashed down at once against the window and lay there doubled up.

The engine blew off steam, the wheels began to turn:—the official lay unconscious against the frame of the window, knocked open by his fall. They took him up by his arms and legs and tipped him out.

‘Should have put him in front of a train!’

‘That sort! and us off to fight for the country.’

‘They’ll keep clear of the fighting, they will: they’ll spend their time taking it out of people like us.’

‘Yes, and they’ll be snogging away behind our backs, with our women!’

‘A real shower, that lot.’

‘Steady on, you lads! They’ll have us in punishment units for doing that!’

‘Look, stupid: they’re *all* punishment units. We’re all going the same way!’

‘I say it’s destiny. It’s written down somewhere you’re going to live: right, you survive even if the wolves have got you.’

The little man who had started all this shifted about uncomfortably, he had nothing to say. And when Molkin the miller pulled out a bottle of home-made spirit he was offered the first swig.

‘Go on, Dimitri Nikititch, take a pull!’ So he got out his mug and had some; the bottle went round, and when it was empty another appeared. Menahem was dozing: someone gave him a shove.

‘Hey, Mikhail, time to wake up! Careful, laddie, don’t fall, watch your head! Dreaming about some high-class beauty, eh?’

Smiling but still half-asleep, he undid his pack and got out his tin mug and passed it over to the man with the firewater.

‘Yes, I’ll have some — not much, just a drop.’

‘That’ll sort you out: you’ll have something to say for yourself, you won’t feel the cold so much.’

Vassili Labzin held forth. ‘The Russian peasant, he can’t drink by himself, he must have company. In fact, a fellow isn’t ever by himself, not really. You see him working all alone in the fields, and you ask him what’s he doing, he’ll always

answer "We're ploughing", never "I'm ploughing". He's never on his own.'

Silence fell: they gulped that fierce raw spirit, and ate bits of bread dipped in salt to take away the taste.

'Well, it helps to make our packs lighter.'

'The bottles are getting on for empty, though.'

From time to time the engine screeched hideously and let off steam. Dusk came, darkening all the chinks and crannies in the carriage, except that the evening light still came in at the open window from which they had thrown the inspector.

They arrived at Potma, and their train stopped some distance from the main-line station on the Moscow-to-Vladivostok line. Doors flew open, packs were flung out, and the recruits jumped down and gathered among stocks of timber. The place was criss-crossed with rails. Here and there single pine-trees still stood, passed over by the axe for one reason or another; the ground was covered with twigs and branches, the forest loomed darkly round the horizon, there was soft wet snow falling, the flakes melting before they reached the ground.

Off went the recruits to the main-line station, staggering between the stacks of cut timber; there were cart-tracks everywhere, rough roads and paths, seas of brown mud blocking the way, with logs thrown down to walk on. There, in the distance, was the station, a dark gaunt brick building; it looked like a barracks with its endless rows of windows, all of them boarded up. It was packed with people; there was no hope of getting inside, so the recruits crowded round the doors, the damp cold freezing their marrow, and they stamped their feet and slapped their sides. As they stamped, liquid mud squirted out of their shoes.

Potma was full of young peasant women, billeted in the station buildings and various sheds and barns; unless one looked carefully, they were unrecognisable as women in their men's clothes — padded jackets and trousers, dirty and ragged, fur hats, crude plaited boots. The work of felling the trees, hauling the timber up to the railway, and then, as locomotives came by, loading them up with fuel, was all done by these girls; even

their voices had lost all femininity, being rough and coarse, and their faces had a ravaged look.

'Hallo, boys! Hallo, me darlings!' one of them cried out. 'Are you going off, too?'

'You over there, you with the dark eyes: haven't you an eye for a woman any more?'

Frolitch started asking about his oldest daughter, who had been taken for this labour force some months earlier. 'Nastia, that's her name. Maybe you girls have seen my Nastia?'

'Nastia? Yes, we've got one girl called that, she's from Torbeyevo.'

He had drawn a blank.

The women were just coming back from work: they stopped for a moment with the recruits.

'Well, boys, you're not the first. Every day they take masses of men through here. How are we going to live without men?'

They stood there, staring at the men hungrily, damp twists of hair visible under those great clumsy fur hats.

'My loves,' begged Frolitch, 'if you ever do see my Nastia, tell her I've gone off to the war . . . don't forget, will you?'

They were not all country girls: some had been taken from the towns as well, for this forced labour in the forests of Potma and — in some cases — for work in the peat-fields. Now they all stood here at the station in the evening light, dirty, their hands bleeding and torn by the heavy logs they had been handling, their faces chapped by the wind.

The little grey man, Nikitich Zubov, being slightly drunk, took one of them by the arm. 'Now, if they'd only leave me here, I'd help you saw the wood, my poor darlings; and what's more, I'd keep you cheerful at night too!'

'Ooh, you wonderful, great tough you big he-man!' And one of them gave him a rough push, so that he fell into the arms of an enormous beefy girl, his face against her fur-covered bosom: she started fondling him with a ham-like fist and crooning 'my little dove, my sweetie-pie!' over him. There was a great cackle of laughter: when the little man straightened

himself out and looked, they were all doubled over and holding their sides.

He was all over mud and soot, the girl's tarry handprints adorned his face; but he couldn't see this or understand why they were laughing, and his bewilderment was painful to behold.

Far away down the line two eyes burnt in the darkness, and a fast passenger train thundered by at full speed from Moscow, its many coaches unlit, their windows shuttered: the heavy night was shattered by that roar of wheels. Before the noise had died away, another train came from the same direction — an open goods train. Nearby, there was a hissing of engines taking on wood for fuel: all the locomotives burnt wood now, whole forests of it.

The traffic controller could not send the recruits on until the morning when a goods train to Moscow was expected: they could travel in that. Meanwhile they were taken to barns and sheds round the station and in various parts of the town to spend the night.

'We're going at dawn: be at the station early!' ordered the men who were escorting them and held their documents. The local party secretary, Nalagin, had gone back home to T'engushai, leaving his assistants in charge.

Some of the recruits failed to find anywhere in the town to sleep, and forced their way into the station. The Mordvin men were the first to manage this to the accompaniment of much noise and cursing in their own language. Great flares smoked and guttered overhead, and outside the yellow lights of locomotives flashed and moved among the sidings; men crowded round the stoves, their faces to the warmth. Shadows moved across the walls, vanished among wood-piles. A man came out of the station and went round among the lines and sidings with an empty kettle: 'Friend, tell me where I can find some hot water?' Eyes peered suspiciously in the dark. 'My child wants a drink!' Then more footsteps, the sudden cry of a sentry — 'Halt! or I fire!' — putting sudden fear into the heart.

For an hour now, Menahem had been trying to find somewhere to sleep. Vassili Labzin and Frolitch were with him;

then they came across Ivan Tchurbassov, the tractor-driver, and he joined them. It was hard to see lights anywhere, as the black-out was enforced strictly and there were blankets over all the windows: but the eye soon became accustomed to the dark, so as to pick out even the faintest glimmer from the tiniest crack or crevice; and Frolitch had the very useful gift of being able to locate houses by smell.

'Here we are, boys, come inside: comfortable here, we'll get a bit of sleep.'

They were soaked. The wet snow had begun to lie on the ground in a grey mush: pine-tree tops shone whitely, as if in the moonlight. 'Only it isn't moonlight,' Frolitch explained, 'it's just snow.'

Slowly a heavy door creaked open; Frolitch went in first.

'Dear mother, please let us in, to get warm by your stove! We're good Russians, we are.'

The woman answered in a sing-song voice. 'God keep you, good Christian lads!' She had a headscarf knotted under her chin and a long, cheap, patched nightdress: the room was decorated with coloured paper, there was an ikon on a shelf by the window: the table had been pushed back against the wall, and the whole floor was packed tight with sleeping men.

'We'll make room for you: come along in!' she crooned; and then, when the candle was out, back came the thick blackness of the night.

Frolitch fell sound asleep at once, snoring lightly; he had the gift of being able to curl up like a dog, and sleep like a stone and then jump up before dawn next day, completely refreshed and wide awake at once.

Menahem did not sleep; he lay listening to the woman's endless slow keening, it was like the moaning of a hurt animal; a heart-breaking sound, full of the suffering which women went through everywhere during these long nights of cold and loneliness.

There was silence for a while, then once again that moaning: the woman seemed to be rocking herself to and fro, perched up there by the stove.

Vassili Labzin spoke. 'Yes, it must be bad for you women as well, not having your husbands.'

'Why, yes, aren't we human too? Don't we have any soul?'

He rose and padded barefoot across to the stove: one of the other men started awake and grumbled.

'Where's your husband?' Vassili asked.

'Off at the war, my lad,' she moaned.

'Is he alive?'

'God only knows. He hasn't written for three months.'

'That's bad. Maybe he's dead.'

The woman gasped sharply and started weeping. 'What shall I do, all alone in the world? Shall I just die? No-one to talk to, no-one to hold me in his arms!'

Vassili took another step and felt the warmth of the stove and the woman's breath on his face at once. 'Let me warm my bones on your stove!'

'Is that all you're after? Get away, you brute!'

But Vassili didn't give up. 'You'll be sorry afterwards when there aren't any men left at all! You just see!'

'I'll scream! I'll wake up all the others!'

They were breathing heavily all round, prostrated by hunger and exhaustion: one of them was snoring. In the clammy darkness, Vassili turned again towards the stove and the weeping woman and started his old routine again.

'Look, stupid,' he said, 'he'll never come back: nobody'll come back. But if I come through, I'll come back to you, I'll come flying to you like a bird; we'll set up house, so help me we will!'

She stopped her crying then, and there was silence on top of the stove.

Later on, after midnight, someone went across to the window and lifted a corner of the blackout cloth; the dark blue night came in at the window: men stirred, turned and fell asleep again. Railway engines whistled nearby, calling and clanking and muttering among themselves.

Now and again the floorboards shook with the hammer and rattle of wheels: a goods train, perhaps, with any number of

heavily loaded trucks, or a trainload of tanks on their way to Moscow: night and day, these trains kept moving. The tanks were as big as houses, each one carried on two separate flat trucks. And passenger trains went by also: they had been made into hospital trains and were full of wounded, the harassed nursing orderlies visible through the windows.

It was possible to distinguish the various kinds of train, even at night, by the noise they made. Menahem counted dozens of them — the traffic was heaviest at night because it was safer than — learnt to recognise them and their loads. Trains of empty trucks rattled in a loud metallic way, making the air quiver and his lips tremble as they went through the station; heavily loaded trains made less noise and disturbance of the air, but they made the earth shake in a way that set the teeth on edge.

Before dawn a voice bellowed at the window: 'All recruits from T'engushai, up now! The train's here. Get over to platform one!' As it grew light they stowed themselves into open trucks; the station seemed a dismal place under a thick blanket of fog, with men moving about like faint grey stains against its formlessness. The whistling of the engine sounded muffled and dead among the woodpiles: voices seemed lost and weak, like the snowflakes which fell and melted before reaching the ground.

There was quiet in the air, but it was a treacherous quiet, something too fragile, too heavily charged with suffering and disaster and despair: it crushed the men's spirits, and they longed for daylight to come scatter the last shreds of night, restoring their strength and spirit, setting them free from this fearful apathy.

In the open trucks the cold struck hard. Some of the men sat leaning against the low sides of the trucks, their knees up, their heads down: others pulled their fur hats down over their faces and stretched out along the cold floors.

At dawn, some old men turned up with sacks of food; they offered the recruits potatoes cooked in their skins, pieces of baked or boiled beetroot, and dark little loaves made from rye caked out with bran and potato; and their wives held out earthenware bowls of creamy milk.

The men pounced on all this luxury, thrusting crumpled notes into the sellers' hands.

'What can we do with money? Give us something useful instead!'

One recruit produced a shirt. 'Take this, we'll be getting uniforms.'

The old peasant cast a practised eye over the worn shirt and slipped it over a shoulder. 'Done.'

Some hard bargaining went on: the recruits threw themselves into it. 'Go on, uncle, throw in one more roll! Don't be mean, you're still doing well.'

They handed over leather belts, leggings, boots. 'They're no good. What do we need them for? And in any case . . .' and so their bags filled up with loaves, potatoes, and beet: they drank up the milk in those bowls and then wiped their moustaches with their sleeves.

Tchurbassov parted with his boots, putting his shoes on instead, and acquired a couple of bottles of raw spirit; one of them was empty before he got back to his truck. 'But don't be angry, boys, I just couldn't hold back: quite beyond my control: my troubles were just too much' — and he babbled on drunkenly, while Savielov shared the spirit out in equal portions, marking a place with his finger, and 'Drink down that far! — stop!'

The train didn't start till about ten. All the lines were congested with trucks, loaded up with great packing cases marked 'No smoking: breaches of this order punishable by court-martial'. Nearby a soldier stood guard, armed with a sub-machine-gun. And everywhere the trucks and wagons were inscribed with the names of towns and cities — Kiev, Riga, Pinsk, Lutzk, Homel — that had long ago been taken by the enemy.

In one of the sidings there was a green sleeping-car with its windows and doors smashed; and there were other coaches overturned beside the line with their wheels in the air, looking like dead horses in an alley.

And when the train, packed with soldiers, eventually pulled

across the tangle of points and out along the clear line to Moscow, the men from Tengushai felt better. There was green country around them, a clear sky overhead; smoke rose from village chimneys; they saw a path edged with willows and dotted with frozen puddles, a lane shining with the ice in the ruts, a country station with its cheerful familiar signboard and its water-tower like an old friend standing to wave a greeting. They were still among fields, and fields had been their friends since childhood; the fields ran after the train, clung to their sleeves. Surely this was where they had been until the day before yesterday, treading these very fields? That valley over there — wasn't that where they drove the horses yesterday evening to graze all night?

The vast sad plains of Russia, endless cornfields shining gold and blue in the autumn: little lime-washed houses, ablaze inside with coloured paper and cuttings from old magazines and schoolbooks; willows aslant beside lonely windmills; peasant girls with bright aprons, sad faces, eager hands: and the men were going. The men of Russia, light and innocent even in their drunkenness, dark-eyed, devoted to the sustaining land; men who kneel in their own green fields and whisper home-made prayers to God; men who count the rings in a felled tree as a miser counts gold in his shuttered room; men who beat their breasts humbly for a moment's misconduct or excess. Be good to such men, O Lord; take pity on them. They deserve to be the instrument of your right arm of vengeance, against the evil that has fallen on the world bringing waste and destruction like a storm of locusts.

Chapter Two

IN the first days of November, the Germans attacked on the Moscow front, advancing along the roads from Volkolomsk and Leningrad. Two weeks earlier they had broken through near Vyazma and started this advance towards Moscow; their forces were armoured and motorised on a massive scale, yet, for a time, the 16th Russian Infantry Division was able to hold them back.

The recruits from Tengushai ended their train journey in a siding by an out-of-the-way station; there was a good deal of complex shunting before the train was in the right place, surrounded by heaps of scrap-iron and with nothing else in sight except the bare flanks of other trucks and wagons, all of them dirty and scribbled with hieroglyphics. On almost all these trucks an unsteady hand had chalked up a circle with a letter in — always the same letter: M.

The engine slipped away from the crowded trucks and vanished leaving a puff of smoke and steam that hovered for a long time in the still air, marking the spot where the engine had been.

The recruits tumbled down out of the train and blundered hither and thither, stumbling among the heaps of scrap-iron. Where can I get hot water? What's this place called? How far is it to Moscow?

A toothless and blue-lipped old man mumbled answers to them: one would have taken him for a beggar, except that he was holding a railwayman's oilcan and hammer.

'Over to the right, there's water there . . . it's eighty versts to Moscow.' He looked round nervously and then said to one of the recruits: 'Here, sell us a bit of bread!'

From the train an official voice bawled: 'No wandering off. Stay in the train and wait for orders!' And one of the soldiers escorting the party went off with a big sealed envelope to find the military commandant of the station.

The little man Nikititch Zubov went off and came back in a rage. 'We've been done well and truly, we have — the station is two versts away, trucks everywhere, no room to walk, we'll have to get down and crawl!'

Among all these wagons the wind blew less painfully; the men's faces had been practically flayed by the cold during their long exposure in open trucks. Now they felt no desire to open their packs and eat; they just lay wearily, spent, parched, and battered.

At noon the escort soldier came back. 'Down, now! Pick up your stuff!' So they got down and crept along, under wagons, between rails and so on, until eventually they came out onto a big open space. There they were lined up in fours and marched off to the station and from there down the main road to the town. The station looked neglected and was partly in ruins: there was rubble in the trucks, and the rails themselves were dislocated and bent. Nearby were some ramshackle sheds packed with servicemen in a variety of uniforms: navy, infantry, armoured corps, N.K.V.D. men, military police, even frontier guard in their coloured caps. And there were aged men with beards, sacks on their backs and baskets in their arms, wearing slippers or canvas boots: there were women in men's clothes, coloured scarves over their heads; there were children bawling in their mothers' arms: there was a canteen packed with soldiers snoring over empty tables. Everywhere were gaudy posters — 'The Hun is your enemy! Kill him!' — with a picture of a Red Army soldier smashing a German with the butt-end of his rifle.

The Tenguslai men by-passed the town, marching uphill along a side road with pollarded willows on either side. A high bare wall crowned with green cupolas lay along the hillside: they went round along it until they came to a big gate, where sentries let them into a great courtyard.

They were called to a halt: Molkin crossed himself and nudged his son. 'Yegor, this is a monastery!'

'A monastery?'

'Yes: look at those domes, those big ikons, all the sacred buildings!'

They all took their hats off: one man made a furtive genuflection. On one of the walls, near the church door, there was a painting of St Nicolas the wonder-worker, but someone had dug out the painted eyes.

The place had not been used as a monastery for a long time: and it had been transformed now into a reserve depot for the 316th infantry division. From here the newly-equipped formations went straight to the front.

That day, they were issued with greatcoats and boots: crumpled old greatcoats, punctured by bullets and torn by barbed wire, and ill-assorted ill-repaired boots of great age.

When supper-time came four columns were lined up, each of two hundred and fifty men, all wearing their greatcoats and their leather boots. A colonel spoke to them.

'From now on you are soldiers! Let this be clearly understood: it is your duty to defend the sacred soil of Russia! All orders must be obeyed implicitly: any disobedience means court-martial.'

They listened in silence, with bowed heads. Then they were dismissed. The Mordvins and Bashkirs walked slowly and clumsily; they were not used to wearing leather boots at this time of year.

Then the men lined up by long tables that had been crudely knocked together in one of the great halls of the monastery: hot soup was brought in buckets and poured out for them into tin bowls: there was a loaf of bread between every five men. Rough four-decker wooden bunks had been made, and after their supper the men climbed up and lay down. It seemed almost dark already: the windows were narrow, and their stained glass cast a greenish glow on the high partitions: overhead, the inside of a high cupola seemed like an inverted pool of blackness.

Menahem's place was on the top deck; the green light shone on him fitfully and on the painted wall beside him, easing his tiredness and calming his wild pulse.

The men were too tired to feel the cold: they kicked off their boots, unbuttoned their greatcoats and collapsed on the hard boards. But the place still buzzed with conversation and argument and banter, and in one corner there was a clinking of tin mugs and a spirituous muttering where the drinking had started.

'Pigs, tanking up already! Not a thought for anybody else!'

'Where did they get the stuff? That's what I want to know!'

People started to exchange coats: they seemed too long. One man found his boots too tight. Bargaining went on.

'If your boots are too big, you're not badly off: you can wrap cloth round your feet inside, and that's warmer too. But if they're too small — well, there's nothing you can do, you might as well sling them.'

From one bunk came a doleful song, about a girl's blue handkerchief and how it fluttered when the time came to part.

Frolitch insisted on giving Menahem his padded jacket. 'Go on, take it, Mikhail: you're not used to the cold.' And then he was snoring loudly before Menahem had a chance to protest.

Nikititch was climbing cat-like over the bunks: all his friends from Tengushai were asleep he couldn't find anybody to listen to his misery, and so he comforted himself by shouting execrations and curses. 'Filthy thing to do, turn a monastery into a barracks! The dome ought to fall and crush people who do that sort of thing!'

Vassili Labzin turned over crossly on his boards, irritated by this complaining.

'— And how cold it is! Wouldn't mind a nice hot stove, warm me old bones. Yes, we'd do a lot better in houses.'

Above the bare altar hung a big lantern made of old tins; beneath it, a soldier knelt on the altar steps writing a letter by the light that fell on him and a group of others. The one

writing was young and fair; another was mending his shirt, moistening thread with his lips, the light falling directly on his hands. The whole of the space between the bunks was full of soldiers, some of them crouching heads on knees, others staring fixedly ahead at nothing. Near the altar a group had collected on the lower bunks, telling one another legends and anecdotes about the huge fishes in the sea: how one of these creatures had swum up a river, upset a fishing boat, and slapped the fisherman in the face with its tail.

When there was a moment's silence, one of the Bashkir men who had come with the Tenggushai party asked how long they would be staying here.

'Not long, chum, not too long. You in a hurry?'

'You'll get plenty of time to get killed in.'

'Not half!'

'These Germans, they keep on advancing, real bastards they are, damn their eyes!'

'Every night, the sky is all red in the west, that's fire.'

'All round Moscow, the villages are burning.'

'The people in Moscow are panicking and trying to get away.'

'Yes, the city's being evacuated, trains and lorries day and night.'

'They'll leave it quite empty.'

'Empty, my arse! It's filling up with soldiers, they're coming in from everywhere.'

'I wonder if they'll be able to hold out.'

'Of course they will!'

'But people are saying that the government's gone, there's only *him* there now.'

Nikititch listened to this conversation, goggle-eyed and gaping: he had never heard that kind of talk before. Were the Germans as near as all that, then? Their front lines just a day's walk away? And the people at home knowing nothing of all this, not even that he was so near action? If only (he thought desperately) someone would say 'All right, Nikititch, you can go now' — how gladly he'd be off to find the village street and

his own home, fling his arms round the children! The stove would be nice and warm, there would be a cosy ring of light round the lamp and the baby would be playing there, his little Grisha, walking already on his tiny bow legs; Nikititch would have just the broken rafter in the roof to worry about, it was making the right-hand side sag down.

His cheeks were wet and his hands shook. Come now, Dimitri Nikititch! Men don't cry! He threw himself violently down onto his bed-boards, but could not sleep: and after a while he reopened his eyes and pricked up his ears and became aware of the murmur of all the other men's presence, and at this a spasm of self-disgust overcame him. He clenched his fists: here was the whole world going off to war, the whole of Tengushai, the whole of Russia, every able-bodied man up in arms against the Roche. And was he to potter round at home by himself, clinging to his wife, lounging by the stove? His friends would come back and say, 'Really, Nikititch! You sprawling on the stove while we were being shot at! Warming yourself on the old woman too! One coward in Tengushai, and it's you!'

And after midnight he fell asleep, his fists still clenched.

The doors opened, and a patrol came in: an N.C.O. went over to a group of men sitting together on the lowest bunk and talking. 'Why aren't you in bed?'

'Can't sleep.'

'Right, come with me.'

'Where to?'

'Cookhouse: they're short on the night shift.'

Some of the men slipped away, and the rest followed the sergeant. Outside in the night, aircraft were droning far off, trains hissing nearby. Several times the guard was changed, with stamping of feet and clashing of rifles.

Menahem couldn't sleep easily. The November cold came with the wind in through the smashed windows; rough bed-boards creaked all round: his back and sides were numb. But he no longer felt rootless, a wanderer with no home or country, his destiny had become suddenly, astonishingly involved with

that of a whole nation, his life had acquired a new point and purpose; he was going ahead to hold a rifle, to throw a grenade.

The fruitful countryside of the Moksha and the Volga had risen in arms; whole villages were on the march against the enemy, and here he was, involved in it. How had it happened? Exactly when was this involvement consummated? Perhaps it had been when he first heard the music of the scythes in the hayfields; or perhaps when Lioska had held his head, one evening, in her gentle hands: or had it happened when he first sat at the rough table before the samovar and the dish of jacketed potatoes and found his eyes meeting the good blue eyes of old Ivan Ivanovitch? Or perhaps at the very moment of his going, when he heard his name cried out across the dark waters of the Moksha? On the other hand, it might only be the war, the fact of a common enemy impartially out for the blood of both sides, that had sealed this marriage between the Russian nation and himself. But no, he thought; hatred unites nothing, only love can do that, the glowing spark of love under the grey ashes of human existence.

He felt within him a sudden uprush of warmth and love, recognised this feeling as part of his racial inheritance; his ancestors, in their day, had given devotion where it was unwanted and unwelcome, had come looking for somewhere to belong, their emotional nakedness and need visible and vulnerable before the world. But in his case, that character of lovingness had been noticed and appreciated by the country folk of Tengushai: and it was for that reason that they had come to love him like one of their own, like an old friend and neighbour, even though he had only spent a year among them.

Frolitch Savielov woke up suddenly in the middle of the night and looked out through the narrow windows. 'Cold,' he muttered. 'Must be freezing hard.' He looked at Menahem: that quilted jacket had been put back on his own bed, the jacket he had pressed on Menahem.

'Look, you'll catch your death. We're used to cold, you're not.' And he spread the jacket over Menahem once again and lay down on his back.

Just now, he thought, he ought to be at work at home, stocking up the feed troughs, running his hands over his horses' shiny backs, feeling their warm breath, hearing their snuffling, inhaling the powerful savour of their sweaty skin, patting their flanks, whispering into their ears: the whole tingling experience of the stables.

Frolitch had seen much in his time: and lately he had seen things get steadily worse. At first, the best horses had been taken and the others had to be worked too hard in consequence. Oats became scarcer and scarcer, and such oats and bran as could be provided for the horses was stolen from them by famished people. The horses just had to starve; it was terrible to see them, especially when the men drove them hard and furiously. Well, the world was collapsing to an end all right: humanity on the rocks, the woods laid waste, the fields desolate, the towns starving, even the skies polluted with iron birds. By now, farm-carts at Tengushai had axles of oak, people tried to plough with wooden ploughs, while round the railway stations and everywhere you saw nothing but heaps of scrap iron rusting unused — rails, wrecked trucks, and so on, iron and more iron, and then in the end another bit of iron poking into your heart, and that's your lot; and after that, just a woman weeping in a hut alongside a stable at Tengushai.

'Mikhail! — hey, Mikhail!'

'Can't you get to sleep, Frolitch?'

'I keep turning things over in my mind.'

'It's freezing,' Menahem said.

'Too true it's freezing, not long to Christmas.'

'After that, New Year's Day.'

'Yes, after New Year's Day the gypsies flog their top-coats!' It became quiet: then Menahem heard Frolitch breathing evenly.

Spurred boots rang on the flagstones outside. A man sneezed. Nikititch Zubov stirred and moaned in his sleep, his fist waving vaguely: 'Bastards! Trampling on our villages and fields, wheels smashing everything. . . .'

The first faint greyness of day came in at the windows.

The morning was cruel, with sleet falling and a knifelike north wind lashing the men's faces as if with thorns and nettles, so that they gasped and fought for breath. They were out very early for training and drill in the muddy country round the monastery: again and again they went round the wall, staggering down the hill, ploughing across the fields. 'At the double, now!' bawled the young sergeant. 'What do you think this is — a wedding at the farm? You're in the army now, get your knees up!'

This young sergeant was a pale skimpy little fellow, Hritzka Savtchuk by name, a Ukrainian from Kupiansk near Kharkov: his Russian was spiced with Ukrainian words. He seemed tireless, and darted to and fro all day like a dragonfly, now to the front of the parade, now to the back. 'Once again, lads: get moving!'

But the wind and sleet became no kinder to the men's faces, and eventually he lined them all up along the monastery wall. 'All right, you can rest now, time for a smoke!'

The soldiers crowded as close to the wall as they could, leaning against the brickwork or squatting down by it, wiping wet faces on the sleeves or tails of their coats. Some of them got out whole leaves of tobacco and cut them up roughly, then rolled them in bits of newspaper and licked them down.

One man spoke to the sergeant, his blue lips quivering. 'What was the news on the wireless?'

'Didn't hear it.'

'Will they be keeping us here long?'

'No, not long.'

'And how long . . . how far away is the front?'

The sergeant looked him up and down disagreeably. 'Look, who might you be?'

'I'm from Tengushai, I came yesterday.' Cautiously, he put on a dull wooden look, masking his eyes' sharpness as a cat hides her claws.

'What's your name?'

'They call me Yegor Ivanitch, I'm the book-keeper for the collective farm.'

'I see: one of these counters and calculators, you want to know things. Well, listen: it's time you stopped doing sums now. That's other people's job, we've got people to do all that. You just watch that pudding-head of yours, see?'

Yegor wiped his little moustache and mumbled something: he was standing smartly to attention like an old soldier.

'You been in the army before?'

'Yes, I served in the first war.'

The officer who had been in charge of their reception the previous evening came riding up. 'Well, boys: cold?'

The sergeant sprang to attention, the men came away from the wall and went towards the monastery gate.

'Sing up!' said the officer, and someone started hoarsely:

'Our captain's a fine lad, he loves us for sure,
And with guns and grenades we'll be off to the war!'

and the men joined in.

In the afternoon they were all marched to a wood about fifteen versts away, to cut firewood for the cookhouse; and when it was dark they collapsed on their bunks, staring sightlessly at the walls, the dome, the windows. Under the harsh glare of home-made paraffin lamps, the ikons on the walls seemed to stand out in three-dimensional reality.

During the midday lunch break on that first day, Menahem decided to have a close look at the chapels set round the great hall: and he stood for a long time, staring at these holy paintings. They were not of any kind he was familiar with: old men with milky faces, their cheeks patched with red, their beards patriarchal and ivory, their eyes fishlike, their robes encrusted with gold and silver and pearls, and the background landscapes were weird and unfamiliar: there were purple clouds, trees looking as if they came from the Garden of Eden, streams of silvery clear water dropping from heaven and rising again magically.

These frescoes were, no doubt, the work of itinerant Italians, such as used to go around at one time decorating the walls of

Orthodox monasteries; usually they were brought to Russia by well-to-do people who had travelled abroad and acquired Italian tastes. Now, their work had been carefully ruined; someone had sat down to a task of scratching and spoiling and disfiguring. A name had been written across the halo of St Nicolas; the pale bosom of the Virgin, where the Christ-child clung, had been scrawled across with obscenities. All the eyes of all these saintly figures had been scratched out: they stared sightlessly, as though with cataract.

During the night the wind died down, and several of the men got up from the aching discomfort of their bed-boards and went out into the courtyard. There was no light in any of the windows there, but they heard gramophone music some way off, and tracked it down to one of the headquarters buildings, where a sentry stood on guard at a closed door and light streamed out from many windows.⁴ A group of men stood enviously outside: this was the officers' mess, there was a dance going on, there were tables and white linen and bright lights.

Menahem saw women there: he had not seen any within the monastery before. Where did they come from?

'They're nurses, from the medical corps.'

Labzin stood transfixed: 'Come on, boys, let's have a look! Move over, you lot! You've been staring for hours, room for two here, let's have a good look!'

'Steady on, you aren't at home now.'

Labzin grinned sheepishly. 'Well, give us something to smoke, then.'

Frolitch had to hunt through his pockets: tobacco was getting low, it was time to look around for supplies. They lit up.

'I'd like to be let in for a nice warm, I would!'

'And a cup of tea, and to have all those babes smiling at us!'

One of them passed round the cigarette he had rolled, so that the others could have a spit and a draw. They grew tired of stretching up to look in at the windows, but didn't at all want to leave all this light and gaiety, so they sat down on the steps of the mess and along the walls, and turned their hat-flaps

down and their coat collars up against the driving snow, while the officers came and went and the waitresses dispensed good things.

Menahem was under one of the windows, with his friends: he said nothing, there was very little conversation, they all felt gloomy. Then the door opened and a lieutenant stood there: he looked at the soldiers and blew out a cloud of smoke.

'Give us something to smoke, sir!' one of the men asked. 'We've got nothing.'

The officer tossed over his own half-smoked cigarette and went back into the mess.

Menahem stood up. 'Where are you going?' Frolitch asked him.

'Back to bed.'

'Stay a bit — perhaps we'll get some smokes!'

But off Menahem went across the courtyard, muffled in his coat, his icy hands thrust deep into the pockets. The mess door opened again; light and a snatch of music came out for a moment, and a voice begged again for tobacco.

Menahem had never before felt as depressed as now.

Suddenly a torch shone in his face.

'Who's there?'

'A soldier.'

'Where are you going?'

'Over to the church, to go to bed.'

'You can't go this way: about turn!'

It seemed an authoritative voice: Menahem turned obediently and started to go back. But he was stopped again: footsteps approached, and the voice asked: 'What do you think you're doing, chasing around when you should be asleep?'

Menahem said nothing.

'How long have you been here?'

'Since yesterday — I came with the party from Tengushai.'

'What part of Russia do you come from?'

'I'm a Jew, from Poland.'

'A Jew, eh? All right, carry on.'

But a moment later the voice went on: 'From Poland, you say? Well, wait a moment.'

In the darkness, Menahem could just see the gleam of polished boots and badges of rank: he could not see the officer's face.

'Come and see me in the morning, at headquarters.'

'Who shall I ask for?'

'Tell the guard that you have to see the Commanding Officer.'

The C.O. of this reserve camp was a man called Akim Suzayev. He had originally been a primary school headmaster in a village near Arzanas: during the pre-war years, he had become assistant to the local Party Secretary, and then — just before the war began — an N.K.V.D. official. He spoke Russian like an educated man, but his appearance betrayed Mordvin ancestry: prominent cheekbones, eyes slightly slanted, a snub nose with large nostrils: when he spoke he liked to say 'we Russians' emphatically. As Commanding Officer he was everywhere: you were always under his eye, on the parade-ground or asleep in barracks: every evening, when the wood-gathering party returned, he was there to meet them. Yesterday in front of the headquarters buildings, he had pounced on a man who was only carrying one small log, comparing him to another who had loaded himself heavily: the party had been made to wait there in line while the C.O. assembled all his staff and harangued them. 'Look at these two men. This one, he's an irresponsible dodger; in action he'll be a coward. The other has the right attitude: keen, loyal to his comrades. He'll face the music and take his medicine all right!'

Then he spoke to the man who had the big load — it was fat little Kuzma, from Barashovo: 'You're exempted from drill and from this wood-collecting fatigue for three days.' And he punished the other man with three nights of extra guard duty. 'We Russians have to get our ideas and values straight.'

He continued to his staff. 'Now that's the correct way to teach them: that was a proper lesson, according to modern educational theory.' By now they knew modern educational

theory by heart: every new intake of recruits suffered the same lesson.

In the morning Menahem reported to the headquarters office, and stood waiting by the door. Suzayev came and stared at him in silence, his eyes blank, expressionless, impenetrable. Menahem felt confused and at a loss, as though he were lost in a fog, with only the hard indifferent features of the Commanding Officer, visible before him, looking down from a frame of scarlet.

A telephone operator came by, and Menahem remembered that he should be standing at attention.

'Come here. You're the chap I met last night? What's your name?'

'Menahem Issakovitch.'

'Jew?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What wind blew you here?'

'No wind: I was just called up with everybody else.'

Suzayev thrust his jaw out, his lips twitched. 'I see, yes, called up. Very good, very good!' His eyes narrowed and he smiled sardonically. Menahem saw his tobacco-stained teeth. 'Well, you look like an educated man: what did you do in civilian life?'

'I'm an artist.'

'An artist, eh? Now that's interesting. Back at Arzanas, I had a close friend who was Jewish . . . but he was a salesman. And I used to know another, he was manager of a shop. No artists, though. Yes, my real friends are miles away at Tashkent, they've left Moscow after working there for years. . . . There used to be plenty of Jews at Moscow, but they've all gone now. What about you, old chap? How did you let yourself get sent here?'

He was speaking in a sentimental and familiar way, with more and more warmth in his voice: his hand was on Menahem's shoulder as he went on.

'And so you're a Polish Jew, and your country's occupied by the Germans.' He wrinkled his forehead. 'Well, you must

have something you want, some request to make; I'll see to it. I mean, in connection with your service.'

Menahem could see what the C.O. was after: he saw it in those furtive little eyes.

'My request, sir, is that you should let me go back to my place in my own unit, with my friends from Tengushai. May I go back to barracks?'

Suzayev gaped at him. 'What's that?'

'I've got to get to the front. I've two accounts to settle with the Germans.'

Suzayev laughed: Menahem felt uneasy and angry.

'Good lad, it does you credit!' He clapped him on the shoulder and led him to the door. 'Anna Dimitrovna, this chap here is an artist, and he can read and write!'

The telephonist put the receiver down and held out her hand.

'I haven't seen you before, but I'm glad to meet you. Where are you fixed up?'

'In the church; bed number five, at the feet of the Saints!'

The orderly room staff found this most amusing: they had not come across anyone like Menahem before. The men they were used to handling were peasants and lumbermen from Bashkiria and Mordva.

'We Russians . . .' said Suzayev as he turned away: he closed the door and then called out angrily through it. 'Recruits have no business to go wandering round the barrack square at night, it's not allowed!'

That, then, was the conclusion of the interview between Menahem and Akim Suzayev, Commanding Officer of the Reserve Headquarters of the 316th Infantry Division.

During November of that year, life in Russia was a nightmare of suffering which will never be understood or imagined except by those who were actually there to see the stations and roads and lanes and market-places, and look into the eyes of the people there as they stumbled across the tangle of railway lines with all their worldly possessions on their backs and their tiny babies swathed in shawls in their mothers'

arms; people in their hundreds and thousands swarming into the stations to sit on their baggage night after night, drowsing hopelessly and waiting for trains that never seemed to come.

They did come eventually, and then moved off by night, shovelling the agony of Moscow off to the huge emptiness of Central Asia. As each train came in, the desperate crowd would scramble madly forward, climbing onto the roof, breaking the doors open, smashing the windows, clinging to ledges and steps; everywhere women were waiting and children crying, and there were hordes of miscellaneous people — cripples, wounded, tramps, ten-year-old pickpockets, newly-released prisoners, deserters frantic to hide on the roofs of the trains, officers with wooden cases, smart well-dressed women, and everywhere soldiers and more soldiers.

The villages and towns round Moscow were being evacuated; trains arrived from Wiazna and Briansk and Tula while the fighting was actually going on in these parts. Other trains kept turning up from various directions packed with freight; nobody knew where they were meant to go, and so hundreds of trucks piled up, clogging up the marshalling yards. At one station the transport staff of the great boot-and-shoe factories at Smolensk wandered around, baffled: they were supposed to be on their way south, with all their machinery and several tons of footwear with them, all packed into thirty trucks, but they had nowhere to go. Every day for a whole week the man in charge rang up the Light Industry Commissariat in Moscow; eventually he heard that the Commissariat had moved to Kuibishev: the War Ministry never answered such calls at all. Then at dawn another train of evacuees turned up from Moscow: it included the entire staff of a publishing house. Yesterday it had been a chemical works, on its way from Moscow.

Peasant women plied trade around these trains, baskets on their arms: the Moscow people were buying anything and paying well, the party from Smolensk had already sold a whole truck-load of shoes—they and their families had to eat. The men sat about among the machinery and the station buildings

while their wives rushed about with bundles of paper money and armloads of goods for barter.

A good many of the younger men felt no distress at all at being forgotten and ignored, left in a backwater in this fashion: at least it kept them out of the fighting, and so the longer this evacuation took, the better pleased they were. Everybody knew what was going to happen, any moment now, though nobody spoke of it.

'Have you heard? Moscow is being bombed for the fourth day running!'

'It's not only bombs, they're using guns too.'

Total strangers greeted one another like old friends.

'Where are you going?'

'To my son at Kuibishev,' said a woman in big army boots and a man's overcoat.

'You'd better go further than that. Kuibishev is threatened too, didn't you know?'

A soldier was stopped by military police. 'Let's see your documents!'

'I'm from the 219th Regiment, 3rd Artillery Battalion. I'd just gone to get a bit of hot water to make tea, and when I came back the train had gone!'

'Come on, those documents, not so much backchat!'

'But I've already reported to the Military Commandant at the station, he knew all about me, he told me to wait . . .'

'You come along with us, chum.'

Then an engine came up, hiding the station and rails in clouds of steam.

The countryside was in a bad way: the villages were all but empty and half dead, their men having all gone off to the war: cottage chimneys were seldom to be seen smoking now. Hungry women left their homes and drifted off to the stations, wandering between the coaches to sell milk, bread, boiled potatoes. Old blind peasant men stayed behind, sitting at their windows and crossing themselves. There was no bread, no paraffin, no salt, no firewood: unwanted fences had been burnt long ago. Children huddled on the stoves all the time: there were no

shoes, and slippers were not enough for November: the ground was sodden, and leggings could not be kept dry.

In those November days Russia seemed like a giant bleeding to death. Menahem saw no blood, he only felt the shuddering, the agonised writhing of this giant.

No orders could stop the eastward flow of people: between June and November millions left the west.

'No withdrawal! Defend every inch of holy Russian soil! No desertion!' — so cried the Party leaders. 'Report to the nearest army post! Don't go east — stay put!' So shrieked the posters. Some men ran out to face the enemy empty-handed and unarmed. They were mown down by the German motorised columns, as they thrust like a dagger into the heart of Russia. Armoured units came out of the night and fell on one town after another, always where they were least expected; soldiers and civilians alike forgot their orders and fled across fields and down lanes and tracks towards the east, sleeping under the stars and not stopping: greater crowds than ever besieged the stations and fought their way to the trains — mothers with babies, wounded soldiers, farm officials, Party leaders, workers, orphans, doctors, civil servants, soldiers.

Hunger and thirst and the sad sound of children crying were everywhere. Here an officer leant on his crutches and howled; there a woman put her baby on the rails to make a train stop, screaming for help and howling abuse and threats at the well-dressed people in the sleeping cars.

There were hundreds and thousands of them, these people crowding into the stations to the west of Moscow; there they formed a total obstacle to the implementation of the defence scheme that had been drawn up. Even so, this blind herd-instinct of theirs was what saved Russia; and in the end these people who fled from the west and ended up working in the coalfields of the Urals could be regarded as heroes of the defence, no less than the men who had tried to hold the Germans back in June with such crude and inadequate arms.

The point was that these helpless and panic-stricken crowds succeeded in imposing their will on the authorities: an un-

precedented thing. Orders were given for the stations to be cleared and the people taken to the rear, some attempts were made to sort them out, keeping the men at the front; there were executions for desertion and unauthorised retreat; some officers were shot for ordering withdrawal. But finally the General Staff had to bow to the pressure of events and order a fighting retreat; and this order, reluctantly given, gave the Russian forces a necessary decisive opportunity of regrouping and gathering their strength.

Near Smolensk, various units had been smashed and encircled; now they managed to break out and reassemble behind the Russian lines. Groups returned from Byelo-Russia, from the Kharkov district, from the Caucasus; ragged and hungry, they wandered, some to the coalmines, some to the Sverdlov steelworks, some to the steppes of Tashkent, and some back to the front.

They all found reassurance in the spaciousness of their country: there was room here for withdrawal. And they discovered that places still existed where life was quiet and peaceful: Alma-Ata with its mild weather, Tashkent with its blue skies. The Germans would never get that far! They would die miserably in the cold steppes. Meanwhile, the refugees could live in peace, sleeping under the calm spacious skies of eastern Russia.

The Russian soldier in action against the invader felt at his back the strength and support of the huge land behind him. Its hugeness protected him, enveloped him: he felt the size and power of his country; the letters that reached him from those distant lands of Central Asia gave him continual reassurance about it.

The German soldier felt no such support. He was treading scorched earth, and behind him there was only violence and shock.

The country lay hidden under hard snow, its surface glazed by frost and crackling underfoot. There was no monastic calm in Menahem's monastic barracks: it echoed with the sound of rifle-fire from the training range nearby. At night the western

sky was lit up by the swinging beams of searchlights pausing sometimes in a pattern of intersections, slicing up the sky.

God's world lay silent, waiting, its destructive fury pent-up. That ghastly glow from the western sky shone across the snow: the men shuddered.

'O Lord, almighty protector and redeemer, spare our country, do not be angry! Holy Mother of God, remember your children at the hour of their suffering!' So they prayed, eyes moist, lips quivering, until the ikons around them, although now fallen on evil days, seemed to shine with new light and brilliancc, just as in those far-off days when the church bells still sang out across the country.

The order to move came unexpectedly, at midnight. No lights were lit: they dressed and packed in total darkness. Black clouds were overhead, seeming to crush them down, despite the odd star that shone through here and there. The Commanding Officer stood at a doorway in a long coat: Sergeant Savtchuk was there, taking his orders and moving off towards the barracks. The men were lined up and numbered off.

'Where are we going?'

'No questions!'

'Are we all going?'

'You asleep? Didn't you hear what I said?'

Menahem saw Suzayev: so we're going together, he thought, perhaps we'll be meeting. He had never managed to forget the Commanding Officer's bland smiling, his piggy little eyes, his affectionate hands, his allusions to Menahem's origins.

They were all leaving the monastery, even the staff; only a small guard-party would be left behind. It was still quite dark except for a faint luminousness reflected by the snow, but the men were cheerful. One of them picked up a flint and started to strike sparks. But: 'No smoking! No talking!'

Then Suzayev addressed them. 'Pay attention, all of you. We are going to the station at once; there'll be a train waiting there. You will entrain quietly, sixty men in each truck. During the journey there will be no smoking and no talking

to-civilians: you will just keep quiet and obey orders. You will not on any account wander off. Is that clear?’

Several hundred voices assured him that it was. Frolitch started to ask some question, but a sharp order was given and nothing could be heard then but marching feet.

Menahem felt at ease among them, with Frolitch the stableman on his right and Vassili Labzin on his left.

‘You see that well, Mikhail?’ whispered Frolitch. ‘It looks like a beam-well; it’s easy to draw water with that sort. That heavy cloud over there: a thaw, would you say? or snow?’ And so on: he had to keep talking to ease the misery and homesickness within him: he felt that if he stopped talking he would howl uncontrollably.

‘Mikhail, what are you so quiet for? You’re not saying a thing! But your eyes are: oh, yes, your eyes are great talkers! Do you know, I can talk to you for hours on end and not worry when you don’t answer, because I can see your answer in those talking eyes of yours — in the daytime, that is. But it isn’t the same, not at night. We Tengushai men haven’t got eyes like that, you know, not like yours: ours are like water, no colour. Yours are black and deep. Anyway, I can’t see you in the dark, and then I feel as if I’m talking to myself, you don’t seem there at all.’

‘Oh, Frolitch!’ Menahem sighed and took Frolitch’s hand: they marched along the snowy road together, hand in hand.

Very expeditiously, they were all packed into the train. In the station there was a feeble light from lanterns: the men felt tired and dejected now, their limbs enfeebled; they lay in the trucks with eyes closed, half asleep but unable to sleep properly, finding thoughts of home and of what lay before them equally intolerable. Half-dreams bothered them, of threads and meshes tangling around them but dissolving at a touch, of strange lights and grey shapes dancing before the eyes or fogging them up like cobwebs, of friends turning into corpses as one tried to speak to them, of frightful vapours coming from hell, so that thoughts of home became madness; and inside their skulls there was a steady hammering, bang, bang, bang . . . what

was it? Who was beating drums, and why? Or was it their heads, all throbbing? Help! Frolitch!

But there was no answer, no word at all spoken in that truck as it rattled through that November night of war: the men just lay in a heap, like merchandise piled into a goods train, exposed to the icy winter weather. The window showed a world of snow, a square of night sky: Menahem found that even in the darkness he could now pick out his friends from Tengushai by the noise of their breathing, by the dark mass of each man's clothes.

Here was Frolitch, so close that Menahem could feel his body-warmth; further off, little Dimitri Zubov lay asleep, propped up against the side of the truck; and over there was the broad face of Vassili Labzin. It was sad to think of Vassili wasting the springtime of his days in this sort of sleep; the train was going through one village after another, and in every village there were houses, and in every house there were young women, lonely because their men had gone to the war, with nobody to bring them loving words and comfort. And here was Vassili, wasting this wealth of opportunity in sleep.

That snoring came from Ivan Tchurbassov, always cheerful and good-natured, while in another corner lay Yegor the book-keeper, who had always been unkind and suspicious in his attitude towards Menahem. Yegor was always up to something: when the train stopped, if a few men came together for one purpose or another, he'd be there among them, moving about importantly and discreetly, full of plans, waiting for the word or the right moment to do the great clever thing. Well, he'd be having all the action and practicality he wanted, before long.

Then, beside Yegor lay Vassili Molkin the miller with his son Yegorka — a boy still, inseparable from his father even in sleep; and near them, Soboliev the farm manager, a man not used to a hard life, nearer to collapse than any of them. Kuzma the blacksmith from Barashovo lay silent, like a great tree in the depth of the country at midnight: Kolka, beside him, seemed child-like in the faint night glow that came in through

the window and fell on his plump cheeks, his little mouth, his snub nose.

Menahem sat up: a thought occurred to him. How far was it from Moscow to Warsaw? Was there any chance that he and his friends from Tengushai might eventually end up there, at his own home?

No sound came from Frolitch: he was sleeping peacefully. Soon it would be light: at the moment the train was going through a wood, but at any moment now light would come in at their windows, reflected from open fields of snow.

Menahem closed his eyes: it was good to be in this train, rattling through the night on its way to Moscow. He would be in the thick of the great encounter: the Germans were at the gates of Moscow. He prayed: 'One favour, my Lord, let me meet them and fight them, these Germans, in front of that city, and side by side with these simple country folk from Tengushai.'

'What's the matter, Mikhail, you awake?' Frolitch had opened one eye.

'Yes: I'm praying.'

'Do you know where they're taking us?' Frolitch asked sleepily.

'Yes, Moscow! We're going to Moscow! The Germans are attacking Moscow!'

And the first grey light of the new day came over the vast plains of Russia, crept in at the tiny window, and shone on those men in the train.

Chapter Three

CLOUDS hung heavily over Moscow; flocks of birds kept streaming in from the west, carrying some message or portent through those grey November skies.

Early every morning they came by, their wings dipping and swinging noisily among the clouds. It seemed strange; these were not ravens — ravens have black wings and fly low — these birds of some unfamiliar sort, driven away from the fields and forests of White Russia by the noise of aeroplanes and gunfire; they had abandoned the swamps and forests where they nested during the winter, and now they were passing over Moscow, on their way like everybody else to the Russian east.

There was wind and cold and rain on these days of November, and thick mist in the early morning; there was thin and uneven rainfall, and even in the moonlight you could see fine driving wisps of rain. When it showed the snowflakes were grey and yellow, and they melted before they touched the earth: the countryside seemed like the face of a soldier wounded and lying on the battlefield, the snowflakes melting as they fell on his face, a sign that there was still some life in him, still some breath, as there was now still some life and breath in the wounded city of Moscow.

Early every morning, thousands of people went out of the city with tools to dig trenches and trap traps; there were old people and young, women with little baskets hanging from their shovels, young girl students, even school-children and old folk in dark shabby overcoats, and you would sometimes see an old man in glasses with a brief-case hanging from his belt. They all went in silence, serious, grim and determined.

The houses were shuttered, the shops closed; there was no movement around the underground stations and little motor traffic in the streets. But inside the underground stations there were patient crowds, nobody with any idea of when a train would come, nobody ready or able to answer the impatient questions of weary women, burdened with their worries and their luggage and their babies.

Everywhere there were wounded men wandering about, their arms and legs bandaged; some would hop clumsily and in unpractised fashion on crutches, men newly out of hospital and not yet accustomed to their condition.

On and on went the task of digging the city's defences; there were half a million people on the job, citizens of Moscow, hacking away at the frozen earth with rough tools and bare hands, digging three or four metres down and working without break until night closed down on them, feeding themselves on hard crusts and cold potatoes which had been ill spared from their hungry homes. In the factories men worked frantically to produce mortars, machine guns, bullets, bombs, all of them taken straight away to the fighting units, so that the soldiers would receive them and use them on the same day that they had been made.

Every day new divisions were formed from the population of the city and marched off immediately to the front. Nobody was spared; old men, secondary school-children, women, workers on the underground railway, nurses, they all went off with rifles in their hands.

At night it was like a city of the dead. German aeroplanes attacked continually, coming in threes like wild geese, screaming down out of the night clouds.

The streets were patrolled constantly, by soldiers, N.K.V.D. men, and others in civilian clothing armed with machine guns. These patrols moved silently and in pairs, scrutinising people and houses, peering in at doorways.

'Documents, you?'

A man wearing a black overcoat stood still, but none of the passers-by stopped: nobody bothered to see what happened,

whether this man would be led away by the patrol or permitted to go his way. People were indifferent.

At night little points of light glimmered and vanished among the streets: these were the night patrols. You would hear the few isolated shots from somewhere in the distance: a man would poke his head anxiously out of a doorway and then vanish immediately.

When the shops were open there were long queues, made up of old people and women. There might be 150 grammes of bread per person, and the people queued up to get it, huddled against the icy wall.

‘Friends, is it true that we are going to get a double portion because of the anniversary of the October Revolution?’

A soldier laden with his equipment came into the shop. The others wanted to stop him, but he raised his fist savagely at them.

‘Look, I’ve been fighting for the country, I don’t want to have to fight for a bit of bread!’

Up came a lorry, with about a dozen soldiers on it, busy about some errand. In front of the lorry, a limping horse slipped on the stones and stopped, unable to move its cart further over that icy ground. You couldn’t get a horse shod properly nowadays, one of the people in the queue observed.

The lorry stopped, its way blocked by the horse: the soldiers stared at the people queuing up for bread.

‘Mother!’ shouted one. ‘Mother’

One of the soldiers began to sing dolefully:

‘No more apples, no more pears,
Only frost and snow;
No more fun with Katiusha—
She’s nursing soldiers now!’

On the seventh of November, Red Square was thickly covered with untrodden snow; it had been closed for a whole week. Now a big parade tramped across that expanse of white in front of the Lenin Mausoleum, while a grey mist hid the

towers of the Kremlin and the domes of the monastery. And while these soldiers were parading across Red Square, the Germans in their advance on Moscow reached the very suburbs of the city.

They had at their disposal fifty-eight infantry divisions, fourteen armoured divisions, and eight motorised. Their attack came by way of Rzhev and Kalinin to the north and Orel and Tula to the south; they attacked incessantly with bombing aircraft as well, though the Soviet anti-aircraft guns engaged them and managed to keep the Junkers away.

Already *Pravda*, the official daily paper, was being published not in Moscow but in Kuibishev; it arrived in Moscow very late. All government offices were being hastily transferred to the east. An army had been quartered in the Kremlin, and there were anti-aircraft guns in the gateways, on roofs and windows and on the balconies of buildings of all sorts. The General Staff had its headquarters in an underground station.

The city was not going to be abandoned to the enemy: the Commander-in-Chief had resolved to hold Moscow to the last.

The roar of aircraft filled the mist.

'Those are ours: you can tell by the sound they make!'

The long beams of searchlights stabbed the night skies. A shell went screaming up and shattered in the heavens.

A very special army was being concentrated in Moscow. The units composing it were made up of active Party members, N.K.V.D. groups and men of the Party Militia. They had been specially brought together for the defence of the city, and now they were everywhere.

The flight from the capital had not stopped. People left with government offices, with the factories, with every kind of workshop and co-operative, all making their way from Moscow into the depths of Eastern Russia. To get away in this fashion was the dream of nearly everybody, but not all could manage it; many of them were forced to work in the munitions works, where you could be sentenced to death, just

like a deserter from the army, if you left your work. In spite of this discipline, people still abandoned all their belongings and vanished in great numbers. Everywhere the walls were plastered with announcements and orders, with Orders of the Day issued by the General Staff and by the various units which were holding the city. Stalin's speech was broadcast countless times, and was also displayed at every street corner.

'The criminals of Germany wished to conduct a war of extermination against the peoples of Soviet Russia. They will have that war of extermination brought back onto their own heads!'

And when these words came over the wireless, there came with them some clapping and some cries of applause and approval, though the Town Hall of Moscow where the speech had been given was half empty at the time.

'Three hundred and fifty thousand Russian soldiers have been killed. Three hundred and seventy-eight thousand are missing. One million and twenty thousand have been wounded. But during these four months the Germans have lost more than four million soldiers!'

Already it was winter: snow fell in Moscow. During the night, the tramp of new military formations filled the streets endlessly; and again and again came the heavy and ugly German bombers, black and with yellow wings.

Yesterday the bread shops had been closed. It was only towards nightfall that any bread appeared, and then it looked more like yellow bricks than loaves of bread. In one street, a cart carrying this bread had been attacked and emptied by a crowd of people.

'It was soldiers who did that.'

'No, it wasn't soldiers, it was deserters!'

'Well, there were some people among them who were carrying spades; they must have been on their way home from digging trenches.'

Now there was more looting of shops at night; drunks staggered about in the streets; children used to lurk in doorways and gateways and snatch handbags from passing women and then

vanish. Painted and powdered women used to stand around the streets at night-time, wearing soldiers' boots and flowery shawls.

'Stop a minute, darling!'

A drunken soldier stopped and rummaged through his pockets. 'I've got no money!'

Where had the patrols got to? During these last few days they had been nowhere to be seen. Lorries packed with silent soldiers flew through the streets, not stopping or slowing down anywhere.

Where had all these drunks come from? Where did they find the stuff? What lay behind the unrest and tension that filled the air?

Somebody whispered in a gateway in an agitated voice. The Germans were preparing a major offensive! Everything would be destroyed, absolutely everything; they had concentrated fifteen hundred tanks near the city; they were all ready.

Some people, reading the signs of the times, put on their best clothes and hung out ikons in front of their houses.

Moscow was to be captured by a pincer movement, closing in from Volkolomosk and Tula, while already the Germans were mounting their attack from the west, and throwing into the battle their best-trained and most famous infantry formations.

At the door of one bakery a long queue stood stretching, straggling far down the road. The bread ration was getting smaller and smaller and there was nothing but bread to be found in the shops anywhere.

'When are they going to get us something to eat?'

'Won't be long now!' The man with the turned-up collar spoke sharply and incisively. 'Won't be long to wait now!' He turned to face away from the other people in the queue and looked up at the sky.

'I say, chum: what are you looking for up there?' a woman asked.

The man glared at her, his eyes small and burning.

'Has it anything to do with you, what I am looking for in the

sky?' and he spat. 'Ah, they're ev'rywhere! — these sheeny women, these Jewesses; well, you know what's coming to them——'

In a fury, the woman left her place in the queue and stopped one of the passing soldiers; but he only shrugged his shoulders and moved off, not saying anything, while the people in the queue grinned.

'Yes, you find them everywhere!'

'Ah, why didn't you run away to Tashkent, somewhere warm and comfortable? You're precious delicate people, you lot are!'

Then a man in an army greatcoat said: 'Yesterday they kicked the sheenies out of one of these queues. The man in the shop was a Jew and he was letting the Yids have theirs out of turn. There's Jews everywhere! The racket they're on now is swindling us all out of our bread ration.'

'They got whole truck-loads of corn out of Moscow. That's why the rest of us are going hungry here, now.'

'They've been fooling the government. They were supposed to take machines from the factories away in those trucks; instead they took loads and loads of food.'

'They've taken gold too — all the gold in the State Bank.'

'Well, I'll tell you what,' said an old fellow in glasses. 'Comrade Stalin is a just man. He is our protector; he'll have all these Jewish swindlers shot!'

'Go on?' said a young schoolgirl, wondering. 'What they say is the Germans aren't fighting the Russians at all, only the Jews.'

The old woman would not calm down; she stood in the middle of the pavement, demanding justice, and so she missed her turn: when the shop started to give out the bread, the people in the queue would not allow her to take her place.

'You never stood in the line with the rest of us!'

'You never stood in the queue! You weren't waiting with the rest of us!' several people shouted.

The old woman had large sad Jewish eyes and a pale face: she was wearing a dark woollen shawl. Her lips were trembling,

and she couldn't utter a word. Bent and unhappy, she moved away from the bakery doors and shook her fist at the people who were excluding her from the queue.

'Do you know, I've got two sons and a daughter at the front! They're junior officers!'

Then her own tears choked her, and she could not go on with her complaint, but stopped in a shabby old doorway, leaning against the doorpost, resting on her hands; above her head hung an extract from Stalin's speech, printed in large letters on fine white paper: 'To the people of Suvarov and Kutuzov . . .'

Now, in the streets, there were soldiers: not smart regimental men, but ragged, filthy, and silent, their faces unshaven, their eyes staring. Vaguely, they moved towards the station; their orders were to report to the Military Commander at some railway station. They could not be allowed to wander around the streets indefinitely; in any case hunger drove them to report for duty, since by now there was no food to be found in the whole of Moscow. Among them you would find Tartars, Mordvins, Bashkirs, Kalmuks, Georgians, Armenians; they walked not on the pavement but in the middle of the roads, gazing in astonishment at the fine big houses around them.

In the doorway an old man stood and talked to a group of these soldiers, telling them how to get to the station.

'What's the news, Grandpa?'

'I have heard nothing. Nothing, I tell you!'

'You've heard nothing? Well, well, you'll hear all right, you'll hear during the next few days!' And the soldier made a despairing gesture with his hand.

Now two of them became separated from the others, turned into a doorway and sat down on the stairs inside. The N.C.O. in charge of the party noticed their absence, and panicked and dashed about the street, stopping all passers-by and asking: 'We have lost two soldiers, have you seen them?'

'Yes, I did see two men, they nipped off into a doorway somewhere.'

Then somebody asked: 'Who are missing?'

'Those two from Nara-Pominsk.'

'I suppose they'll run off home!'

'But the Germans have got there! The Nazis have captured Nara-Pominsk already!'

'They're deserters, that's what they are!'

'They shot a deserter yesterday.'

And off all those soldiers went.

A lorry clattered up, fully loaded: nobody made room for it.

'Hey, let us through!'

A man in civilian clothes looked out over the side of the lorry.

'Hey, shift out of the way, you men!'

'Look! That chap in the lorry, he's not a Russian, is he?'

'Well, who is he, then?'

'Can't you see? He's a Jew!'

'A Jew?' asked a Tartar.

The soldiers closed in around the lorry.

'Where are you going, chum?'

'What's it got to do with you?' the man in the lorry shouted angrily.

'Well, you're having a ride anyway! and we're not worried if you starve; look, we haven't had a bite to eat for two days!'

Some more soldiers came up from across the road, and one of them jumped up on to the lorry.

'Give us a lift! we don't want to walk!'

'Look, that's out of the question: we're loaded up with stuff.'

The soldier who had jumped up on to the lorry began to look around inside and then suddenly he yelled at the top of his voice: 'There's bread here! Lots of bread! we can all have a meal!'

A Bashkir reached across and grabbed the driving wheel in his heavy fist.

'Take your hands away! Let me go! All this lot is for the officers' canteen at Divisional Headquarters!' The driver had pulled out some papers and was waving them in the air. Suddenly the street was full of soldiers, with civilians standing by, looking on from porches and doors: there was a general movement towards the lorry, one sack of food got flung down, and

then another; a large round loaf went rolling down the road; the tailboard of the lorry crashed open. The driver made an attempt to move away, but before him a short thick-set man with black eyebrows barred the way.

'You see what they're up to, pulling all kinds of rackets, selling the stuff on the black market, running away from Moscow, dodging the Army!'

'Who is he?'

'He's a sheeny!'

'Hey, they are the lot who started this war!'

'Yes, and now they're all hiding and dodging the column!'

'Well, don't let him run away, call the soldiers.'

By now the whole load had been thrown off the lorry on to the pavement, and the men were tearing off bits of bread and eating them and sharing the rest of it out among themselves. The civilians standing by brought up sacks and filled them and dragged them off; bottles of vodka were produced and traded, two bottles per sack of bread.

'Now you get moving!' the soldiers ordered the driver.

The lorry moved away, throwing the driver's mate down from the running board: he fell to the ground and rolled over and lay there, his face covered with blood.

'Ah, it's another of these sheenies! We ought to put a bullet in him.'

'Hey, driver!' somebody shouted after the lorry. 'You're one of us! take a drop of vodka, don't let's be unfriendly!'

'Well, what's going to happen to those two who got away?' the man in charge of the party stammered drunkenly. And they sat on the lorry and drank and cursed.

Now, anti-Semitic slogans started to appear on the walls, written there with chalk or tar: Death to the Jews! The Jews were to blame for the war! These slogans were soon painted over, but the next snow that fell washed the walls once more, and once again these battle-cries peered out, like bones among the monuments in a cemetery.

At this time, the Soviet High Command was holding its

reserves at two places: at Zagorsk to the north of Moscow and at Riazan to the south-east. In these two districts were stationed the Russian armies which were due to go into action during the next few days.

The units comprising the 316th Infantry Division came by railway from Zagorsk to Metishtchi, and from there to Moscow, moving only by night.

The men from Tengushai found themselves in one of the units making up this division; but they no longer marched in groups according to the villages they had come from — the Bashkir men and the Kulikovo men and the Oksha men, each lot together and apart from the rest. All of the recruits from the whole of the countryside around Tengushai had been pulled together in one large unit, which included some men from the Gorki district as well. Lieutenant Akim Suzayev commanded the unit, and his second-in-command was Hritzka Savtchuk.

Once Metishtchi had been left behind, the nearness of the front and the fighting became apparent in the searchlight beams that cut across the sky at night, seen now as a pale distant flickering, now as sudden stabbing brilliance, now as a moving pattern of golden embroidery within the shape of a cloud. Then occasionally the searchlights would dip to the horizon and momentarily light up a burnt-out village with blackened chimneys and twisted bare tree-trunks around. The bare willow trees still had snow on their branches, but many of the tall pines had been knocked down by artillery fire, their tops sent spinning for enormous distances by passing shells.

'Frolitch, why is the sky so overcast? You can't see the stars at all.'

Frolitch Savielov knew these parts quite well, and had often taken his horses from one of these villages to another.

'Around here is where people can come from Moscow when they want a bit of holiday,' he remarked. Then he went on: 'It's because of the searchlights. Just like human eyes don't like that sort of light, so the heavens don't like it either. That sort of light puts the stars out. The stars are eyes, you know, the eyes of Heaven; God looks through them; He sees every-

thing and knows everything, He sees me and you. Look, Mikhail, do you know why they use these searchlights? They want to dazzle God's eyes so He won't be able to see the earth. They want Him to look the other way, and not look at poor old humanity at all. Well, that's how it is; the stars are dazzled and put out, the soldier drops dead on the battlefield, it's the light from the searchlight that's killed him, the light from the bullet.'

'You're not very cheerful, Frolitch!'

'Well, why should I be cheerful? Do you see those birds, flying off to the east all day long? Whole flocks of them, and they're trying to get away from these fields of battle. You can see that the whole world is upside down: we go to the west and they're off to the east.'

Shortly before dawn, units of the 316th Division halted in a village twenty-five versts to the north of Moscow, to one side of the road from Metishtchi to the capital. Their instructions had been to proceed to Moscow without stopping, but the road was blocked with streams of military traffic and artillery and equipment of all kinds, and they were held up. German reconnaissance aircraft were aware of the activity in this neighbourhood, and kept the road under close observation.

The officer commanding the division, General Pliskin, appeared suddenly in the middle of the night; he came to where the men from Tengushai were standing and asked for Lieutenant Suzayev. Savtchuk at once ran off, calling for Suzayev, and meanwhile the General asked a soldier for a cigarette.

'Take my pouch, sir!' and Zubov held out the tobacco pouch and wiped his mouth politely with the palm of his hand; then with his flint and steel he struck sparks and offered the glowing piece of tow to his Divisional Commander.

'Where do you men come from?'

'We come from Tengushai, sir, on the river Moksha.'

'Are you all from Tengushai?'

'Not all, there are some from other districts too.'

Through the darkness, Savtchuk's voice could be heard calling: 'Lieutenant Suzayev! Lieutenant Suzayev!' The General moved restlessly among the men. Frolitch sprang to attention before him, like an old soldier. 'Tell me, sir, when are we going to get at them? We don't want to hang around forever! We want to get this thing finished with, and get back to our wives at home!'

The soldiers all laughed.

On the road the traffic was blocked, with lorries facing each other and unable to move in spite of their drivers' cursing; searchlights shone, and the whole scene of confusion was as bright as day.

Then the General noticed Menahem among the Tengushai men; they stood face to face for a moment and their eyes met; something in the General's manner made Menahem feel an uneasy sense of familiar disquiet. This seemed like a situation he had met before.

'Where do you come from?'

'I'm from Poland.'

'You're a Pole?'

'No, I'm not a Pole; I'm . . .' But before Menahem could manage to finish that sentence, the General had placed a hand on his shoulder.

'Yes, yes, I understand. What's your name?'

The lorries all turned their lights off, and the searchlights went out too: suddenly there was darkness all around, nothing visible but the glow of cigarette ends.

'Menahem Issakovitch.'

Then Lieutenant Suzayev arrived at last, panting. The arrangements were made: the men were to turn off the main road to the right, go to a village five versts away, and stay there until dawn.

The cottages in the village were cold, the men had to improvise fires as best they could. The barns were quite empty locally, and the peasants there had to make what living they could out of whatever was left or passed on to them by the

soldiers. Several of the houses were occupied by the Divisional Headquarters and a Field Hospital.

Menahem put his pack down in a cottage near the hospital and strode off down the village street, made restless by his meeting with the General. Jews, Jews; General Pliskin was a Jew; there must be Jews in this village; it was a long time since he had spoken to any Jews. Menahem felt like a hunted beast, sniffing desperately for a safe road and familiar faces; he felt that he had to find Jews among the other soldiers. He peered in at the cottages, he stood listening where little groups had gathered to talk, he stood by doorways, he gazed at passers-by. It was a long straggling village, and the dirty frozen snow crunched under his feet; the place was littered with wrecked and abandoned vehicles, lying on their sides or upside down with wheels in the air.

A soldier came from the main road, limping painfully, his coat torn, his fur cap pulled down over his ears. 'Where's headquarters?'

'I'll go with you, it isn't far. Have you come a long way?'

The man stared at Menahem with swollen and bloodshot eyes.

'I've come from Smolensk, that's where. I came right across the lines.'

'What, from Smolensk?'

'Yes, and I went on foot all the way from Smolensk to the front lines, on foot, I tell you. And the things I saw! Yes, I've had a fine old time, I have.'

'Is Smolensk your own town, then?' Menahem asked, and then burst out excitedly: 'Have you seen any Jews? What about the Jews of Smolensk?'

For a moment both men said nothing, but stared down in silence at the trodden snow while a man went by on horseback and a lorry moved along the street and a voice called out urgently for the Field Hospital: there were wounded men arriving.

'You see,' Menahem stammered, 'I'm a Jew myself, a Polish Jew, I want to know about the Jews . . .'

The other man waited until the street was quite silent and deserted before he spoke; and then he spoke in Yiddish.

'There are no more Jews in Smolensk, none at all. Jews are being killed everywhere — in the forests, by the roadsides, just everywhere.'

They were outside Divisional Headquarters by now, and the soldier clasped Menahem's hand and whispered to him: 'Don't tell anyone that you're a Jew. Don't let the men in your unit know about it; don't call yourself by your Jewish name, change it. If you get taken prisoner by the Germans, the other soldiers will hand you over if they know you're a Jew. They shoot all Jewish prisoners. You just bear it in mind! It's happening all the time.'

Menahem found himself alone, choking and gasping, his knees weak; he had to cling to a fence for support.

Eventually he found his way back to the cottage where he had left his pack, and found it pleasantly warm; his friends from Tengushai were sitting around the stove: Frolitch, Zubov, old Molkin, and peering out of a corner the farm book-keeper.

Menahem felt giddy and sat down; the men were laughing all around him, some of them playing cards and some throwing dice; somebody sang, and a man with a red beard was cursing. There was a rattle of mess-tins as the men made ready to collect their evening meal from the field kitchen.

Somebody prodded Menahem's feet and tweaked his coat. 'Hey, come along! don't sit there by yourself! Wake up! Come on, Mikhail, get up!'

'Who's that? Is it you, Frolitch?'

But it wasn't Frolitch, nor Zubov: in Menahem's tormented mind it was Yegor, or Suzayev. 'Take them away! I shan't go, I shan't move an inch, leave me alone! I'll shoot, Yegor! Don't come too close! I know your sort! I'm a Jew, I tell you; a Jew from Poland! . . .

There was nobody left in the hut. Frolitch had been the last to leave and he had tried to get Menahem up and on to his feet, without success. He still lay, cramped and twisted, his eyes shut, his dry lips muttering about his secret visions of fear.

Later on in the evening a medical orderly came. Menahem had a high temperature by now: he had still not opened his eyes. They took him away to the Field Hospital, and Frolitch spent the rest of the night restlessly, unable to sit in the hut, tramping out every few moments to stare out into the dark with eyes close to tears.

During the night the men from Tengushai left the village, not by the main road from Metishtchi to Moscow but along a rough track which had been made by tanks. The damp wind sent thin snow flailing about them; there were pale searchlights groping on the horizon, but otherwise no light of any kind to be seen.

Near at hand they heard the sound of an engine: what was it? An aeroplane? A lorry bogged down in a hole? The wind moaned, and the sound of it blended with the faint tumult of distant gunfire.

Then another village, a long street, the houses all burnt out, with nothing standing but black chimneys; but even among these ruins there were people living, sheltering, trying to keep themselves warm among the burnt-out ruins of their homes.

God's curses seemed to lie upon the whole world, His anger seemed to be bearing down upon the heads of sinful men. Back at home, at Tengushai, old Mikishkin had said last spring that the world was moving towards destruction, that a great man would come, a mighty warrior whose word would be as a flame, a flame that would set every corner of the world on fire. Wherever his armies passed snakes would spring from the earth, and they would spread their venom over the whole world. And old Mikishkin gave a sign to show the truth of his prophecy: you will see, children (he said), that on all the leaves that grow on the trees this year there will be a brown vein twisted like a snake. And that is exactly how it happened; every tree, every bush displayed on every single leaf a vein or mark like a brown snake. And so all the old women of Tengushai, the ones who still used to go every Sunday to the holy spring beside the abandoned monastery on the banks of the

river Moksha, they all knelt down by the spring and wept their hot tears into it for the sorrow that would be coming to the world.

The beam of a searchlight probed the air above the road and then suddenly fell like a collapsing pillar upon the men as they marched. Frolitch fell silent: the light dazzled his eyes, and made him conscious of his weariness and his stubbly, tired face.

‘Saints of God, all you saints of the holy spring by the monastery, pray for me and come to my aid!’

‘Hey, Frolitch!’ said Vassili Labzin. ‘What’s all this? Have you become a preacher or something?’

There was a sudden roll like thunder, close at hand, and then the huge shout of an explosion, and the woods on the horizon seemed to split apart: they seemed no longer like woods, but like the battered walls of a ruined city. Slowly, a huge flame split the sky in half, spraying it with hot metal, ripping away the black curtains of the night and displaying the raw red flesh of the heavens. It looked like the burst belly of a dead horse.

Menahem woke up at dawn: a lamp flickered, and the grey light of morning came in at the windows. He sat up impetuously and looked around him; but at once the lamp swayed and the windows receded to an immense distance and his bed lurched like a small boat caught in the rapids.

‘Nurse Anna! Nurse Anna!’ a harsh voice cried out.

A sleepy nurse came from the next room, and Menahem felt humanity and gentleness beside him. There was a warm hand on his forehead; it stroked his hair, and a gentle voice spoke softly. The whirlpool in his head subsided; the window panes swung back into place, the lamp returned to normal.

‘Who are you?’ he asked, opening his eyes carefully.

The nurse looked at his eyes: as black as the pit, she thought, yet somehow they shone in the winter darkness.

‘I’m Anna, Nurse Anna of the Field Hospital.’

‘What happened to me, Anna?’

‘Nothing much — a touch of weakness and fever, it will be

gone in no time.' And she sat in peaceful silence on the edge of his bed.

'It's morning now,' said Menahem. 'How long the nights are!'

In the hut there was a large stove in full blast, and it was comfortably warm. A soldier pushed the door open and came in and flung down a bundle of wood beside the stove.

By now it was light enough for Menahem to see Nurse Anna clearly. She was wearing a light-weight army shirt and a broad belt; her hair was pulled back, and she had wide eyes and a high forehead. She sat on the edge of the bed, her feet crossed; Menahem looked from her face to her hands, which were resting on the edge of the bed, and he saw that her long, slim fingers seemed to be restless and trembling. His eyes dropped to the heavy army boots she was wearing. He tried to smile, but only a grimace came. *

'They call me Mikhail; Menahem is my name really. It's Frolitch who calls me Mikhail: he says it's easier to pronounce, he feels more at home with Mikhail than with Menahem.'

'I know. He was here, that Frolitch, and he wanted to say goodbye to you. Your unit left during the night.'

At once Menahem started to look anxious; the nurse understood, and reassured him. 'You'll catch up with them, you'll manage all right. Your documents have been left here. You'll catch up with your friends in Moscow; I'll make the arrangements — two lorries go from here every day.'

'You're very good to me.'

He put his hand on her fingers and felt them trembling.

'My name is Anna Samoilovna Korina.'

'Samoilovna?' repeated Menahem eagerly.

'I am Jewish, I come from Moscow. You are a Jew too, aren't you? I saw your documents, they are in the hospital here. You come from Poland, don't you? From Warsaw. There, I know all your secrets! I looked through your documents. You don't mind?'

He tried to smile, again unsuccessfully, but he managed to relax a little.

'My mother lives in Moscow,' the girl went on. 'There is nothing she would like better than to meet a Jew from Poland!' And she got out a tiny lace handkerchief and wiped Menahem's forehead. 'Keep still, now. You're not allowed to move an inch.'

Another patient called for her, and she arose and went. Menahem watched her walking between the beds and then off to the next room to fetch something. Afterwards she wrapped a woollen shawl over her head, flung the ends around her shoulders and went away. But the presence of her youth and femininity stayed in the hut.

There is nothing wrong with me, thought Menahem. I'll be better in no time, perhaps today, perhaps tomorrow, and then I'll be away. It's just tiredness, that and a kind of collapse because of being so tired. Now, if only I had some paper, some lovely white paper and a pencil! — a well-sharpened pencil over the whiteness of the paper, like the first footsteps across untrodden snow by moonlight, eh?

This was the first time since leaving Tengushai that he had wanted to draw. He felt it now like a spasm of desire, throbbing in his head and making his hands twitch across the sheet as though he was feeling for the outlines of his vision: black chimneys over a ruined village, jagged flashes in the dark sky, clouds broken and filled with fire, horizons quivering with rockets, searchlights in all their moods of brilliance and uncertainty and weakness and dissolution; and then before his restless mind's eye came human faces, one after another, moving like moons across the sky, with only a single one remaining to shine steadfastly — the face of Anna the nurse.

Then a stamping of snowy boots in the corridor outside, and the door opened and she stood there, bringing in from the street the coldness of wind and the scent of the early morning.

After breakfast the doctor came, and stood silently listening to Anna as she talked, and nodding his head at everything she said. His army coat fitted badly and the belt was not pulled tight: this was no member of the regular medical corps, but an

old retired physician who had lived in an outer suburb of Moscow and volunteered for the army when the war began.

He paused at Menahem's bedside, took his hand, felt his pulse.

'From Poland, eh? Anna just told me.'

'Yes, I'm from Warsaw.'

'Warszawa?' said he, pronouncing it in the Polish way. 'Yes, a lovely city. Ah, those Poles. Krakovskie Przedmiestie! you must have been a little chap at your mother's apron strings then; *psa krev, panie.*' And the old doctor laughed as he remembered odd scraps of Polish that he had picked up in the past.

'Well, you're feeling better, eh? You can leave tomorrow. Pull yourself together, *panie szanovy*; get stronger and tougher, if you can, though you don't seem likely to be a giant . . . but after all, you don't have to be a great big bull of a man if you're going to be brave, you just have to be a normal human being. A human being!' he repeated loudly. 'Understand?'

'I understand.' And for the first time since his arrival in the Field Hospital Menahem managed to grin broadly.

The old man slapped him gently on the shoulder and departed cheerfully.

Anna was busy all day: Divisional Headquarters was to be moved, and the Field Hospital was to go too, so she had a great deal to attend to.

In the afternoon she came across to Menahem and leant against his bed.

'How do you feel, Mikhail?'

She was beautiful: her brows were arched like bows and her eyelashes were dark; and had an olive complexion, a fine skin, and lustrous deep brown eyes.

'Well, well,' Menahem answered. 'I don't like lying down all day.'

'Would you like a book? I'm reading a good book at the moment myself.'

'Thank you, but what I would rather have would be paper and a pencil.'

'Do you want to write a letter?'

'I want to do some drawing: I am an artist.'

She brought some paper, and Menahem sat up and looked at her carefully for a long time, moving the point of his pencil tentatively just above the paper.

'No, don't go away, Anna. Stay here, go on sitting there, just like that,' he asked. His hand circled over the paper, stopped, quivered over one spot incessantly. Anna sat quietly, her serious gaze at the window panes; the light fell on her hair, on her thin nose, parted lips, and white teeth. Menahem realised that her eyelids were quivering slightly: why? Because of the light? Because of the effort of keeping still? Because of his own concentration upon her?

But when she saw the drawing she was delighted. 'That's me! Yes, I can recognise myself! But I don't think I am as serious and thoughtful as that. Or perhaps I have become like that, just lately: do you think that's true, Mikhail?'

She seemed to find it pleasantly disturbing that a stranger should look at her so closely, and follow with an artist's caressing eye every detail of her muscles, her hair, her eyes. And he had seen something different and individual, something not seen by the people who had known her previously. All this she saw and felt in the drawing.

'Take it, Anna, it's for you.'

She thanked him and asked him to sign it. So all that afternoon Menahem sat up in bed, and covered sheet after sheet with fine pencil drawings of the roads he had marched along and the soldiers he had met. Frolich in particular he drew in a number of different situations.

Several officers came across from Headquarters and looked at his work in astonishment. One of them brought a half-finished letter and gave it to Menahem, saying: 'Please do a drawing of me, just here; I have left room on the paper. I want the people at home to see what I look like!'

Menahem smiled and agreed.

. In the evening he got up and walked about the room: he met Anna, and said to her: 'I feel quite all right now, perfectly well.'

Anna had nothing to say to that: she just looked at him, at his narrow shoulders, his black hair, his twitching hands. He is tall and handsome, she thought, a head taller than I am.

In the small room that opened off the ward, a medical orderly was playing old tunes from the Russian countryside on a harmonica. The noise of traffic in the street outside died away; Anna came to Menahem's bed and knelt down beside him.

'Tomorrow, you'll be going away.'

'Yes, I know.'

'I have already fixed it up with the driver, you'll be taken to Moscow.'

'Thank you, Anna, I'm very grateful; I shan't forget you.'

'Look,' she said, 'why don't you take down my Moscow address? Perhaps we shall meet again, after the war!'

Menahem only smiled at that thought.

'No, Mikhail, listen. You take a note to my mother, she lives at number 59, Makhovaya Street. You may have to spend a night in Moscow; well, don't spend it in a railway station, my mother will find room for you. Moscow is packed full of soldiers who have nowhere to go. My mother must be longing to hear from me!' and she went away and soon came back, handing Menahem a sheet of paper folded twice like a lover's knot.

'You know what's happening? The 316th Infantry Division are moving up to the line; and all of us in this Field Hospital will be following close behind you, we've been getting everything ready. You remember the old doctor? he'll be staying in Moscow; I am taking over from him. You see, when the war started I was in my last year as a medical student, and I wasn't able to finish. But in spite of that, a week ago I received my certificate as a doctor. Oh, it's frightening to be called "Doctor"! It's much easier if they only call you Nurse or Sister. I like hearing some patient calling for me, all agitated, and crying out for Nurse Anna, Nurse Anna!'

Menahem was moved and wanted to reply, but the sound of heavy lorries outside drowned his words.

Frost was patterning the window panes; outside, there was the roaring rattling noise of a lorry which refused to start in the cold.

The lamplight shone on Anna, but her face was in shadow: Menahem saw only her hands and her back distinctly, and when he took one hand in his he found it blue and chilblained. On the floor, a dark puddle of melting snow spread around the army boots she was wearing.

He found himself waking up; it was still dark, and the lamp had been turned down. The sick men slumbered, wrapped up in their blankets. Outside in the village street there was shouting, rising and falling and echoing away: 'Orlenko! Orlenko!'

They were calling Orlenko: who might he be? And who would be calling like that in the middle of the night? Perhaps Orlenko was some silly soldier who had managed to get himself lost among the heavy tanks and the lorries. But where did that noise of gunfire come from, those scattered and distant shots like hail rattling against a window? A cat jumped down suddenly and crouched under the stove, its eyes glowing, its shape a mysterious moving shadow in the half-darkness.

Menahem felt in the grip of an unidentifiable suspense. What was he waiting for? For daylight to come? For the mysterious Orlenko to turn up? For that reluctant lorry to start at last? For more gunfire? Well, what would come would come anyway: the frosty glint of cold steel, the hot violence of a bullet on its way to the heart. But when would it happen? Tomorrow, today?

The engine of the lorry outside roared into life suddenly, ready to go: Menahem turned to the window, but it was too dark to see outside. Suddenly he turned with a jump: Anna had approached him quite silently in slippers, her jacket over her shoulders.

'Now, Mikhail, what's the matter? Go to sleep, have a good rest!'

She bent over him; the jacket fell from her right shoulder

and in the very pale light reflected from the snow and coming in through the window he could see her neck and the roundness of her shoulder.

'Anna, I am waiting for something.'

'What are you waiting for?' She held her jacket together with one hand and fumbled it back on to her shoulder with the other.

'I don't know: all I know is that when I saw you I understood something quite clearly for the first time.'

'Look, your hands are trembling!' and once and gently she touched his forehead with her lips. When he opened his eyes she had gone.

Towards dawn he fell asleep, but not for long; feet tramped about, a bundle of wood was flung down by the stove and he woke up. Later on they brought him something to eat. On a stool by his bed his uniform had been laid out: the jacket had been repaired, the seams stitched up, and the boots polished. He got up and dressed, made the bed and sat down to his breakfast: he still felt quivering in his head and walked unsteadily. That would be, no doubt, the result of lying in bed for a couple of days. Then he went out. It was a dry and frosty day; at the open door stood a sentry on duty, filling his pipe.

'Good morning,' Menahem greeted him.

'Good morning. Smoke?'

The soldier offered his tobacco-pouch and a piece of newspaper; Menahem rolled himself a cigarette and puffed away.

'When does the lorry go?'

'Noon.'

He started walking down the long village street. Divisional Headquarters was already half empty: a few soldiers were busy taking telephone wires down from trees and fences and rolling them up. An old countryman was leading an unshod horse along, and at the well two peasant women stood in sheepskins, chattering loudly. The machinery of the well creaked as they worked it: the blue forests of Russia stretched off into the distance, and a pool of smoke rose vertically towards the sky from a chimney.

'That means frost,' said one of the peasant women. 'It's going to be a very heavy frost, and without any wind.'

At midday, when the lorry was already waiting outside the Field Hospital, Menahem met Anna in the road. She seemed silent, and stared around at the snow.

'Lieutenant Lobov, this is the soldier I mentioned, his name is Mikhail; he has to catch up with his unit. Wait for me just a moment, I'll be back at once.' And she entered the building.

Menahem wondered who was asked to wait for a moment. Why didn't she speak to him? She seemed unhappy and lost in gloomy thoughts.

Lieutenant Lobov fidgeted with the lorry and fussed impatiently. Anna came running down the stairs and said something to the sentry; then the engine was started and Menahem sat beside the driver.

'All right, carry on!' cried Anna, standing on the running board of the lorry. She leant in and put a little parcel on Menahem's lap. 'It's for you, Mikhail!' That was the first time she had spoken to him all day. The lorry slowed down at the end of the street to make a detour around a tank which lay upside down and covered with snow; till then, Menahem held Anna's cold fingers tight in his hand. Her eyes shone sharply: but they were oddly shadowed, or seemed so to Mikhail as he took her hand.

'Look after yourself, Mikhail: goodbye!' And as the lorry accelerated around on to the main road, she jumped down from the running board, waved once, and turned quickly away.

The road was in good condition, and the lorry made good speed towards Moscow. Lieutenant Lobov drove without speaking: he had already been in action and had been wounded near Gezhatsk. He was driving to the hospital in Kaluga Street, and on the way he would pass through Staro-Vladikino, where Menahem ought to be able to rejoin his unit.

The road was full of traffic: vehicles, columns of marching men, convoys of lorries. Everywhere there were overturned

vehicles in the ditches, half covered with snow. Soon they came to the defences. Walls built without windows, low blockhouses, barricades erected from railway tracks and even from ridges of snow. There were notices and signposts everywhere, strange inscriptions on signs and marks for the information of various units. There were sentries guarding walls and sheds: they would stand stamping their feet and slapping their chests, machine-guns swinging. Along the roads were trenches full of snow, high earthworks, deep tank-traps. Anti-aircraft guns pointed upwards among the trees; a soldier sat perched like a stork on its nest on top of a station water-tower. There were telephone wires everywhere, lying along the snow and draped between the trees: arteries carrying the life-blood of the Russian army.

The lorry stopped. 'This is Staro-Vladikino.'

Menahem leant out of the window of the lorry and asked a soldier where he could find an infantry regiment of the 316th Division. The soldier was carrying a rifle fitted with telescopic sights: 'Yes, an infantry regiment has turned up here; they are over there, I think.'

Menahem got down from the lorry. There were soldiers moving about everywhere, individually or in groups; they were all armed with machine-guns and sub-machine-guns and every kind of infantry weapon.

In order to reach his unit, he had to walk some way along the northern outskirts of the city of Moscow. His way led him uphill, and soon he could see the wall of the Kremlin and the Spasky tower. He looked around with interest; he should be able to see the Uspensky Convent, and near it the Church of Vassili Blazheni.

He stopped to look about him, and up from behind came a bearded old peasant, wearing a belted sheepskin coat and derelict boots.

'Good day to you, father.'

'Good health, son.'

'Can you tell me where the camp is?'

'Just along here, only two or three minutes away!'

They walked together silently for a while, and then Menahem told the old man how beautiful Moscow seemed to him under the snows of winter.

'Yes, beautiful, and holy, too,' the old man answered. 'Over there' — and he pointed towards the Kremlin — 'is the Clock Tower that Ivan the Great built; there's an enormous great bell in it, very heavy. When there's some disaster going to happen, that bell falls from its tower and smashes to bits. It fell down at the time of the Tartar invasion, it fell down before Napoleon entered Moscow. Each time they re-cast the old bell and its note was lovely, yes, just as clear and beautiful as angels' singing. Well, do you know what they say now, that bell's fallen and got smashed again; the bits of it are over there, in the Kremlin!'

And the old man shambled on his way.

The sentry at the gate of the camp let Menahem in; he reported to the headquarters of his unit, and the duty officer took his documents and gave him a place in the barracks.

A cold tense voice came over the radio: 'Enemy armoured formations have broken through our defences in the direction of Moscow. The city is threatened! Moscow is in immediate danger!'

Then, in the silence that followed, each man heard only the stifled sob of his own breathing; until the Soviet Hymn peeled out from the loudspeaker, fading out and followed by one brave military march after another.

The soldiers lay silent along the walls. The barrack room was unlit, and the windows shone with the dull red glow of distant fires: out to the west, the forests of Russia were burning.

Chapter Four

By the middle of November the Germans were ready for their final and decisive attack on Moscow. The Soviet High Command issued regular but unrevealing communiqués: 'artillery fire has been exchanged, our own positions have been held.'

Reserve units were brought up into position each night; and among these men there was a kind of peace, the peace that follows a moment of decision, "when all the arrangements have been made and the orders given, so that there is nothing left to do but wait for the appointed moment.

The German plan was to close the pincers with which they had nearly encircled the city. Their front ran from Volkolomosk to Tula: by the middle of November they held Kalinin and Dimitrov to the north, and had advanced in the south from Tula to Stalinogorsk, capturing the whole of that region and threatening Riazan, which was one of the last railway centres linking Moscow with the eastern parts of Russia.

Whenever two armies face one another, there exists between the two headquarters a kind of *rapport*, despite the trenches and the tank-traps and the disputed territory between them. Enemy intentions can often be divined by intuition more certainly than by any interrogation of prisoners, and an experienced staff officer can sit in a front-line dug-out with a map before him and know precisely what his opposite number is thinking not far away, in a similar dug-out and poring over an identical map. Each knows what route the armoured formations must take: each knows when the attack will fall, and what its logic and objective will be. On this occasion, the laws and logic of war made it quite clear to the German staff that

Moscow could not possibly be held, that the reserves around Moscow and Zagorsk were not strong enough to cover their own withdrawal, and that the huge but untrained and ill-equipped armies to the west of Moscow were only there to permit other formations, with more equipment and experience, to be withdrawn to new positions around Gorki and Kuibishev and along the Volga.

The Germans looked on this great mass of raw recruits, untrained and ill-equipped, without concern: they were not worth serious consideration, not even worth bombing from the air. The German purpose was the capture of Moscow: there was no point in starting unnecessary battles during the cold weather, or in provoking the Russians into bringing better troops into action from the rear, or in hindering the evacuation of the city. Convoys out of the city were allowed to pass, therefore, taking the machinery of industry and government to the rear; on the other hand, convoys approaching Moscow were attacked, and heavily. The idea was to weaken the Russians' determination to hold their capital, to undermine their will to resist; the people should be made to feel that as soon as this evacuation was completed, the city would be surrendered. Thus a mood of surrender could be created; and reasoning on these lines, the Germans deferred their final assault.

Meanwhile, the armies of raw recruits kept pouring in, from Metishtchi to the north, from Zviengorod and the Mozheisk road to the south. By day and night they came in convoys from all over Russia and were immediately flung forward to the west of Moscow.

The Russian army had, of course, elaborate supporting services: headquarters, artillery, engineers, supplies, signals, and so on. But these raw armies had none of these benefits: the men just went forward as they were, lightly clad, with few weapons and no field kitchens — only the barest rations for a few days.

This situation disturbed that silent understanding between the two sides: the Germans were puzzled, and showed it. They sent out reconnaissance aircraft, red-painted Heinkels

and Stukas, which roared low across the snowfields and then went back to the west; their artillery was still silent, but at night there was mortar-fire as patrols moved out to solve the mystery.

The German staff were baffled. They still felt certain that Moscow would fall, that it could only be a question of days; the city must already be in the turmoil and confusion that would precede surrender; it could only be sheer habit and the momentum of events that was still bringing forward this useless mass of unarmed men; perhaps they were not raw recruits after all, or perhaps the Russians were only thinking of preventing an uprising among the civil population.

Menahem found his unit at Staro-Vladikino: his friends from Tengushai were sleeping in a big unheated barracks.

Frolitch greeted him with a cheerful slap on the shoulder. 'Here you are again, eh, Mikhail! We've missed you: it's bloody miserable here.' He opened his pack and found some dry crusts and a tin of meat. 'Go on, Mikhail, eat it up: that was left over from our dinner.'

Vassili Labzin grinned: his pock-marked face looked like beaten bronze in the near-darkness.

Dimitri Zubov came up and said: 'We'll be off during the night, I've just heard. Glad to see you, Mikhail: how the devil did you manage to find us? — you had the whole world to hunt in!'

'Well, if it had been me,' Labzin said, 'I'd have spent a week or two chasing around Moscow and having a look at the girls. They've got some nice stuff there all right! — and here's us, off to the war and leaving them broken-hearted and lonely. In too much of a hurry, you were: you wouldn't have missed the party, you'd have been in plenty of time for the . . .' He broke off and assumed a doleful look. 'Yes, there's one I knew of, lives in the Sudovski road: what a peach! When I came here last year for the agricultural show . . . what a smasher!' He had been drinking.

Lieutenant Suzayev appeared, and made straight for Menahem. 'When did you get here?'

'Just an hour ago: I gave my papers in at the gate.'

'Well, I'd begun to think that . . .' He seemed put out: Menahem's friends from Tengushai couldn't think what to say.

At midnight they left Staro-Vladikino, in the direction of the Volkolomosk road: it was a windy night, and a fine, driving, wet snow made it hard to breathe.

Trees, thick with frost, loomed grotesquely through the darkness; ragged clouds moved over the moonless sky, a few stars shone feebly through, and in the distance searchlights dipped and swung over the forest. Underfoot and all round was a meaningless tangle of tracks and roads, the rough scars made by tanks and artillery almost obliterating the old cattle-tracks which led from one village to another. Traffic on the main road, when they reached it, was thin: lorries emerged unexpectedly from the darkness and slipped away showing no lights.

Before dawn they halted on the edge of a wood, a tangled copse of pines and elders and firs and bushes and undergrowth, where they found a group of reservists from Moscow resting, some against trees and some on leaves and branches in the snow.

'The men from T'engushai moved into the wood and talked anxiously with these others. Somewhere through or beyond the wood they heard a steady roaring and rolling and dying away like thunder, and sometimes a spattering sound among the trees, like the hooves of galloping horses.

'Where are we going? Where are they taking us? Where is the front line?'

'Why are we waiting here? Where have the officers got to?'

'Why have they put such a lot of us all together like this? We'll be mincemeat here, if the German bombers come!'

'Oh, Mother of God!'

They were scared and spent, these simple men from the villages: spent and listless, they gathered branches and sat down by the roadside and stared at the dark earth, whole

villages of simple men uprooted — Tengushai here, Bashkirtsi and Oksha there, Dudnikovo across by those bushes, the Tartars of Atenino, the Mordvins of Kalamasovo, the fishermen of Krasni-Yar.

'You know, Mikhail; it's bad,' said Frolitch, pulling pine-needles for a bed. Beside him, a man was drawing in the snow with his finger — a letter, a double cross, a pierced heart. Another was whittling a stick, engrossed in this task and deaf to all around him. Another was nervously twisting and tying a wisp of hay. Another scraped at the snow with his hand and then stared at the earth he had uncovered. Another examined one of the bushes and cried out: 'Look, a raspberry bush; look at that dried-up raspberry there, like a drop of dried-up blood: yes, somebody's blood, dried up out here in the wilds.'

Then that terrible rattling sound drew nearer, like a charge of iron-shod cavalry, and loud thunder like the anger of heaven came roaring up to close in on that corner of a wood where men were sitting.

Lieutenant Suzayev rode up from across the hill, a strange officer with him, and behind them two companies of grim-faced men.

'Look at that lot! They're well kitted up!' And the men from Tengushai gaped in astonishment to see men well fed and well clothed and well armed.

'Siberians, that's what they are!'

Then the two companies spread out and faced the wood. 'Keep back! Don't move!' the Tengushai men were ordered. 'Stay where you are!' Officers appeared and moved about tensely, sub-machine-guns at the ready.

A truck drove up, its chained wheels clanking over the snow, and several officers in furs got out.

'On your feet, now!' with a sharp whistle.

Slow and bewildered, they rose to their feet, staring from these officers to the grey-clad line of armed men and back again. Then Lieutenant Suzayev spoke through a loudspeaker on the lorry.

'Men of the Red Army! You will now be addressed by the Political Commissar, Nikolai Fyodorovitch Zhilin: he will give you the Supreme Commander's orders!'

The gunfire drew nearer still. The Political Commissar stood tight-lipped beside the lorry, his fur coat open, his face weather-beaten, his eyes slanting and wrinkled; he tightened his tunic belt and then looked at some papers. The officers of the machine-gun companies gathered around him for a moment and then returned to their men; Zhilin stood up on the running-board of the lorry and shouted:

'Men of the 316th Infantry Division!'

There was an uneasy shifting and shuffling of feet, a rustle like woods in the autumn wind, among his dry-throated audience.

'Men!' he continued, 'I have brought you the orders of the Supreme Commander!' Then he made a quick signal, and at once the Siberians cocked their machine-guns and aimed them straight at the men from Tengushai.

Then, in a dreadful silence, Zhilin took out a paper and read: 'As Supreme Commander of the Defence Forces, I order the 316th Infantry Division to attack the German enemy, and at all costs to prevent his armoured units from reaching the outskirts of Moscow.'

A raven flapped by, very low, a black shadow against the snow. The men from Tengushai stared in utter silence at the Commissar and then at the line of guns aimed at them.

'Russia may be a big place, but there's nowhere for you to retreat to, even so!' the Commissar went on, 'We've got our backs to the walls, the walls of Moscow!' Then he shouted savagely: 'Well! you heard the order? Perhaps you've got death at the enemy's hands waiting for you; right. But if you turn and run like stinking cowards, you'll get shot by these fellows behind!' And he waved a hand towards the Siberians. 'Yes, get that clear: deserters will be shot! So it's up to you. You can die like heroes in the face of the enemy, or you can be shot like a traitor, and be a disgrace to your children and a misery to your wives for the rest of their days!'

The silence was profound: the whole world seemed to listen, appalled, to his words.

'In front — death and glory! Behind — death and disgrace, a traitor's end, a coward's end! Choose for yourselves!'

The men stood like statues or shadows. A group of staff officers came; General Pliskin stood by Lieutenant Suzayev, looking at his watch. It was nearly eight.

Without warning, the whole world seemed to explode with a crash of gunfire close at hand. The General listened and nodded calmly; a mechanical cheer was shouted at the men by the loudspeaker, and they all turned and rushed into the deafening and disintegrating forest. 'Keep moving! Forward, now!'

Frolitch caught Menahem by the wrist, and they ran: someone clouted them on from behind with a machine-gun butt. Menahem looked back for a moment: the line of Siberians had not moved, their guns were still levelled.

Something between a shout and a sob of despair came from a Mordvin close to Menahem, and at once there was a burst of fire and 'Rot his guts, filthy coward!' from a sergeant running close by. The Mordvin stayed there, spread-eagled across a bush.

The thunder and earthquake were all about them now: Menahem felt a splitting of the whole universe in tumult and his own falling endlessly through empty space.

. . . What has happened to the trees, why are the clouds pressing down like that? What's the matter with my head and my chest, why can't I push through this murk and fog that's clogging up the trees and the snow, and where did all these ghosts and shadows come from? Has the whole sky been smashed? Why can't I shout? Hey, move out of the way, get out from under my feet, can't you — you can't go to sleep. There, not in this snow . . . Frolitch! Frolitch, my old friend! Get up, quick march, now! We're nearly there, this is almost where the Supreme Commander told us to go; just a few more steps, and you're too lazy? Come on, get up or I'll have to tread over you and the people behind will trample you flat. . . .

Give me your hand, Frolitch, this is a shocking place to go to sleep: look, here's my hand, grab it, now. . . .

Menahem bent down and touched a soldier's face, bearded and waxy and blue. 'Hey! Are you or are you not Frolitch Savielov of Tengushai? Answer!'

There were bits of shattered trees all around, and among them men lay sleeping peacefully. Already they were through the wood and out in open country, bushy but flat. The shooting refused absolutely to stop: little showers of snow and earth kept spattering up where the bullets struck.

Some men panted up, dragging a prisoner, a German parachutist; apparently he had just come down.

'Filthy bastard, shoot him!'

'Don't shoot, Russian, don't shoot: I'm a messenger!' the prisoner cried in German, waving some papers. 'I'm a staff officer, don't shoot!'

'What's he jabbering? Take those papers off him and . . .'

Menahem pulled himself together and looked at the group as they approached, prisoner and captors. Behind him he was aware of an immense movement of men approaching, his own people, new regiments going into action; but so many crumpled heaps on the snow, so many men asleep. . . .

'What's he, a prisoner?' he asked.

'Yes, a German!'

Menahem came up and snatched the papers from the German's hands: for a moment he felt a mad lust to throw himself blindly at the tall enemy figure before him, despite the German's posture of surrender, the mixture of German and broken Russian that he was screaming with such urgency.

A hand shook him by the shoulder. 'Speak up now, man, we're asking you! Can you speak German?' The blood sang in Menahem's head and his eyes flared and closed. The tall German kept his hands up: someone clouted him viciously with a rifle-butt, cursing and blaspheming. 'Wake up, damn you, do you speak German or not?'

'Yes,' Menahem answered vaguely. He went up close to the prisoner again and their eyes met. The German was agitated,

but Menahem's face was hard and set: he had not met the enemy before, face to face, and the experience woke him up and swept the clouds and cobwebs out of his head. He looked at the German with keen, objective hatred.

'Are you an officer?'

'Yes.'

'An S.S. man?'

'I shall make my explanations at your headquarters. I don't propose to be interrogated by a common soldier.'

'Answer, you bloody Nazi swine! Answer!' Menahem shouted savagely, bringing his rifle up so that the bayonet quivered against the German's stomach, furious with the desire to thrust and shoot.

A sealed envelope fell from the prisoner's pocket, addressed to the Staff H.Q. of the Soviet Armies around Moscow. Menahem picked it up.

'We'd better take him to Headquarters!'

'What the hell! We've got to hold his hand and lead him off politely to Headquarters, have we? Haven't we enough to worry about without that? All our men there, dead, and we've got to muck about with this Nazi? Here, give him to me . . . and his boots and fur coat, they'll come in useful!'

But then Lieutenant Suzayev came riding out of the wood; and when he had been told about the prisoner, he detailed Menahem and two others to escort the German officer to Divisional Headquarters at Staro-Vladikino.

. . . What's the time now, morning or evening? Where's that wood gone, the one we ran through so quickly? Are we lost? Look at the trees, smashed and uprooted, roots and branches all in a tangle! And has somebody been doing his ploughing in winter? Well, now comes night: a nice, comfortable veil of darkness, and the broken trees and the broken men can lie wrapped up in it together. . . .

There were shouts nearby, a cracking of ice and frozen branches: once again that thunder, those hoof-beats of gunfire, sudden wild flares and flashes to make the bare bayonet gleam.

'Get down, then, my brave Nazi, if you're scared!'

The German had flung himself down for safety, his face deep in the snow: Menahem stood and smiled contemptuously. 'Look at him, boys: look at him trembling!'

The other two struck lights and smoked. One of them, Adrian, came from Tambov; he was a tall, broad fellow. The other was small and came from Riazan. Adrian's eyes, in their deep dark sockets, were bright and clear as spring water. How did a great tough like him come to have such eyes?

The man from Riazan was called Zakhar Glukhin. He swayed as he walked and held his gun clumsily, as if it were a scythe which he didn't think likely to cut him.

'Oh, Mother of God, just look at the world! Everything's broken and done for: you must be weeping for us all!'

'Ah, stop jabbering!' Adrian muttered. 'We're not in church!'

'As you say. But it does make things easier, you know.'

Menahem started to agree, but the evening wind carried his words away. The men's long shadows marched ahead of them, dodging among the bushes and over the uneven ground.

'It's getting dark,' Adrian said. 'We'll have to tie this fellow's hands: we don't want him to get away. Hey, stop, you Boche! Stop, or I'll shoot, you miserable son of a split-arsed whore, you!'

They twisted the German's hands behind him and lashed them together with a strap off his fine leather brief-case. When they told him to get moving again, he fell on his knees and begged them not to shoot: he was (he kept on explaining) no less than a staff officer.

They found that long phalanx of Siberians still on parade and still armed, standing like trees in a storm. There were camouflaged lorries nearby, with wireless operators at work: 'Hullo Pinetree, hullo Pinetree; this is Welkin calling, Welkin calling; are you receiving me? Over!'

The soldiers rattled their machine-guns and stamped their feet to keep warm, but never broke their ranks.

A few tents had been pitched in the lee of a fallen tree, and

a field-kitchen smoked appetisingly nearby. A low mutter came from the men, a rustle like wind in a cornfield.

Menahem and his companions emerged with the prisoner from the bushes. 'A Boche, a prisoner! Look, you lot!'

'Ah, shut up!' Zakhar growled. 'We'd rather have some supper!'

'Where's your headquarters?'

A man left the ranks and ran up to the German officer. 'Swine, shit-house, bloody Nazi! We'll do the lot of you, you and your Hitler!'

The German looked through him impassively. 'Look what a bloody marvel he thinks he is! But what are you three doing with him? A nice walk?' And the soldier jerked a hand meaningly at his throat and pointed to a bare tree nearby.

It was night when Menahem and the two others found the security troops' headquarters; but the snow shone brightly in the dark.

'Who are you?'

'We're taking a captured German officer to Divisional Headquarters.'

'Wait there for further orders.'

Columns of newly-arrived men moved across the countryside: the line of security troops was opened up to let them through. These men had come from the west; and once again, for their sake, while they stared dumbly at the snow, the loudspeakers roared words of inspiration and encouragement.

'Russia is big, but there is nowhere for you to retreat to! Moscow is behind us; in front, death awaits you, a heroic death, while if you retreat it will be a traitor's death at the hands of the security troops. Make your choice, for the country, for the Father of Russia. . . . Hurrah!'

Familiar words: where had he met them before?

The German sat in the snow, his hands tied, leaning against a tree: he stared into the night, tensed up by the noise of gunfire, listening keenly, waiting for some happening which he knew with complete clarity and certainty to be on its way.

Then, once again, a ragged shouting and a rush of feet, dying away at once into the empty distance and followed by a faint crackle of machine-gun fire.

'Where's the prisoner?' a voice called some way off: it was the Political Commissar, approaching now from the loud-speaker van where he had been speaking to those departed troops.

Adrian sprang smartly to the salute. 'Beg to report, sir: prisoner brought here, under escort, as ordered, sir!'

Menahem handed over the envelope. 'He had this on him: it's addressed to our army.'

The German understood the conversation and tried to rise: but the Commissar roared at him to keep still, and Zakhar clouted him with a rifle butt.

Adrian went over to the field-kitchen and collected some supper for the escort party: hot cabbage soup.

Later in the night some senior officers came across to look into the matter; Menahem was given a movement order, and off they went by lorry to Divisional Headquarters, the three of them and their prisoner. They huddled up against the cold; the cold wind slapped and tore at the canvas cover of the lorry, sharp dry snow drove in and upon them as they went.

Adrian talked in a rapid whisper. ' . . . and those Siberians, they told me that our men are being sent forward in floods, thousands of them every hour, straight at the German guns: a whole army has gone in just since this morning, not stopping. The Germans never stop shooting, but our boys just trample them down like you trample out a fire, they're piling up against them, they're filling up the trenches and then marching across, they don't stop ever — it's like a river in flood it's like the Volga spilling over and drowning the woods and fields and villages and everything. Well, right, we just go on like that, day and night, night and day, until all these bloody Germans are trampled down and washed away: they can't hold back the flood — they can kill a thousand, ten thousand, hundred thousand, anything, but there'll still be more coming. I tell

you, it's a whole country on the march, all Russia standing up to the Germans as one man, and do you know what?—they'll run out of bullets, that's what'll happen to them: they'll never be able to get enough bullets to hold back this flood, any more than you or I could hold the sea back, Mikhail — no time to build dams and dykes, no time. So that's how it is: on this Moscow front, all six versts of it, men pressing on all day and all night. I was talking to an officer from Tambov — that's where I come from — he told me that the Germans could never possibly stop this flood of Russians; hundreds and thousands of us will be killed, but we'll save Moscow. Do you know, just on this narrow sector of the front, the Germans need a whole lorry-load of ammunition every three minutes if they're to hold our boys back — think of that, a lorry every three minutes! They'll run out of fuel, that's what: our people have already blown up the railways they've got to use, and we've got partisans round Smolensk who won't let one convoy get through to Moscow, not one . . .' And Adrian paused for breath.

Menahem remembered the prisoner. 'Don't talk so much, Adrian: that chap's listening.'

'Him? He doesn't matter, he won't get out of our hands alive.'

Zakhar was shivering. 'You asleep, Zakhar?' they asked.

'No, my dear respected old friends, I am not asleep, not one bit. I am in a very bad way indeed, I was just thinking of banging my brains out against that wall, or maybe slicing my heart out, that's all. What did you say, thousands and thousands marching in, eh?'

The German lay there in a heap, silent and still until Adrian prodded him with a boot. 'Hey, you Boche! You still alive? Has the bastard dug into the earth or something?'

The heap tumbled up hurriedly: Zakhar roared at him 'Answer when we speak to you, you bloody worm!' and he began to moan and gibber in German. Adrian laughed: 'Look, he can understand all right! Bloody Nazi!'

Occasionally the lorry would stop and a torch would be

shoved inside: the driver would answer the challenge off-handedly and off they would go again over the torn roads and between walls of snow.

Headquarters at Vladikino seemed deserted except for the orderly on duty. Menahem and the others found him in an ice-cold hut: he tried to get into touch with the divisional staff by telephone, failed, shouted, blew into the telephone, shouted again: 'Yakovlev! Yakovlev, damn your eyes! Are you all gone deaf there? Yakovlev!' Finally he flung the telephone down and his arms up in despair. 'You see? They've left me all alone and bloody useless!'

'What's happened to Divisional Headquarters?' Adrian asked.

'God only knows! Well, well. You hang around till morning, perhaps I'll get in touch then.'

Vladikino seemed quieter now than when Menahem had passed through so recently: no roaring lorries, no shouting men. Even the harsh glare of the searchlights was dim and distant now, and the stars were in hiding.

They went into another room and slept on bare benches; the German sat listlessly by the wall. The orderly went on fighting his telephone: 'Yakovlev! Yakovlev, blast you!' Menahem came through and asked him what had happened to the Field Hospital.

'Evacuated: the medicals went today.'

'Today?'

'Yes; why, are you ill?'

'No; but a nurse called Anna who was working there . . .'

'Oh, her; yes, Anna Samoilovna, I know her. She went off at noon today.'

'Where?'

'With the headquarters and the staff, I suppose.'

Menahem rummaged in his pockets and found a piece of paper folded into a lover's knot.

'What are you worried about Nurse Anna for? She a friend of yours?'

. 'In a way I was in the hospital, I got to know her then.'
The orderly winked at Menahem as he took up the telephone again: 'Yakovlev! What you lot need is . . .'

Then, at midnight, the telephone suddenly started to ring deafeningly. The orderly sprang up, bleary and tousled, and shook the window-panes with his bellow: 'Ah, Yakovlev, you at last, eh? Still alive, after all? What? Yes, I'm listening, let's have our orders . . . Yes, and the prisoner? . . . To Butyrki? . . . Yes . . . yes . . . Goodbye and God bless, then, you lousy bastard!'

And so, at dawn, they left on foot. The orderly advised them to put a Russian coat on the prisoner. 'He's too conspicuous, if you take my meaning; and your orders are to deliver him alive. They're waiting for him at Headquarters. The General knows about it; you don't want to make a balls-up of this and bring him along dead.'

A fine day, a blue sky. 'You know,' said Zakhar, 'if we have to go chasing around all the time, I prefer to do it by daylight; and what's more, I'd prefer to die by daylight too, looking up at a nice blue sky, not down into some horrible mud at night. That's how I'd like it!'

'Well, Zakhar, God is very merciful; that's one prayer that He quite probably will answer!' And Adrian laughed bitterly.

Still the recruits came streaming into Moscow, and from the most remote cities and villages now: there were far more of them than the barracks could hold, and they had to stay in their carriages and cattle-trucks for days on end, while the men in charge of them ran from one headquarters to another for instructions. Hungrily the men prowled the stations, searching the trains for food, begging, trading the clothes off their backs for scraps of bread and bottles of homebrew; they wandered out of control round the city, exploring the streets and squares, pairing off with factory girls off duty, sleeping at night in underground stations or on steps or in trucks or anywhere. The engines that had brought them to Moscow puffed off to

the east again, leaving the trains behind idle. The bags of food, so carefully packed at home, were empty, and all they got now was a small ration of hard bread, weighed out carefully for each man in crude scales made from a stick and two tin-lids. Every evening, a bucket of watery soup was brought to each carriage for the men there.

‘How will it all end?’

‘We’ll just starve, like the horses on all the collective farms.’

‘The Germans are all round Moscow — there’s only one road still clear.’

Then a strange voice spoke harshly: ‘What kind of talk do you think this is? Cut it out!’ This was a Kalmuk by his appearance, pale, cadaverous, with an odd sinister look in his eyes.

One of the soldiers shuddered slightly: another made a great show of searching through his pockets and not being involved in the conversation. But another looked straight at the pale grim Kalmuk and said blandly: ‘But of course we’ll stop them! Moscow is in good hands, very good hands indeed. *He*’ll make those Germans skip! *He*’s in the Krenlin all right, looking after everything!’ And he nodded vigorously.

The Kalmuk went off without speaking, and wandered round the carriage, staring at the rails: then suddenly he turned back towards the soldiers and stared at them.

‘Who’s he?’ they whispered among themselves.

‘Ah, they’re everywhere now; they listen to everything and say nothing. But a day will come when we’ll make them talk: they’ll sing all right then!’

A sergeant went by with some papers. ‘Hey, when are we going to move? Can we go off for a bit?’ they asked, but the sergeant took no notice.

Moscow was full to bursting: men were packed everywhere, into every station and corner. At first it had been casual, with no checking of papers, no interrogations: all that had been left to the N.C.O.s in charge of parties. But now a patrol did stop and interrogate a group of men in the street.

‘Where are you from?’

· 'We've come from the station!'

'Why are you wandering about the streets?'

'Nothing else to do, it's miserable just stuck all day in those trains. Let's see Moscow while we can, eh? We're good Soviet citizens, aren't we?'

Attempts were made to drive the men out of the underground and other stations at night-time; they were not supposed to sleep there, so back they went to the trains and described to each other what they had seen, the long files of wounded, the overcrowded hospitals, the hungry queues. Some of them wandered off among the lines breaking fences and combing odd corners for firewood; then they sat and got warm, toasting chilblained hands and numbed feet, and speaking sadly to one another of home: the familiar warmth from the stove, the holy flicker of a votive light before the dim bejewelled ikons — it seemed very far away, and it was.

It became impossible to keep these men under control, tens of thousands of them packed into scattered and miscellaneous trains, sheds, warehouses, barracks, and large buildings of every sort all over the city and its suburbs; and every day more turned up, an irresistible tide of them in every kind of transport and on foot, blocking all the roads and tracks. How many of them were there altogether? How many had been recruited? Nobody knew: it was only known that they kept on coming, day by day, more and more of them.

German bombers tried to attack the crowded city; accurate anti-aircraft fire drove them off.

Then an attempt was made at dispersal: some units were moved to Nadiezhcina, others to Kriukov, about twenty-five versts from the city. The authorities were alarmed about the confusion and congestion in Moscow: already there had been violence between the new recruits and the military police, with windows broken and food stores raided and savage abuse shouted at those who — as the recruits thought — were going to dodge the fighting.

It came very close to a pitched battle at the Kazan station: the recruits took over the station and drove all civilians out. In

Makhovaya Street a military policeman was shot: two N.K.V.D. men were found dead in Lermontov Square: in Novà-Piasetchra Street a mob of recruits looted a shop in broad daylight and got away with a great deal of splendid stuff which had been meant only for high-up Party members.

Ragged crowds of recruits strutted about the streets menacingly. 'If we've got to die for Russia and Stalin, then let everybody die, not just us! Why can't the Party members go too, instead of lying there warm and comfortable with the girls!'

The rioting lasted a few days, and then an order was issued by the General Staff: all recruits in and around Moscow, all soldiers of every kind, everybody of military age was to go straight off to the front and bar the enemy's way to the capital.

The clearing of all these men off the streets and out of Moscow took just one day. Security troops took over: they placed guards over the government buildings and then drew a cordon all round the city except to the east. No soldier was allowed into the city: they were all sent to the front. So the orders were given, early one morning while the men stood paraded; and from now on, supply services would only be available to the security troops. The huge mob of unarmed men now being sent forward to meet the Germans had no need of supplies. Before them lay nothing but space and emptiness and fear, an earth frozen and tormented, trees uprooted, villages destroyed; they were ill-equipped, thinly dressed, unfed. Behind them were the great spaces of Russia, Moscow the great city, the Kremlin with its grim walls: but at their backs were the machine-guns of the security troops.

Menahem and the others arrived at Butyrki with the German prisoner and found the place packed out with recruits, shambling around the streets in shawls and furs and odd clothes of every description, crowding through the cafés and stations and squares and everywhere. At one street corner, tanks squatted grim and ready, their crews smoking nearby. Adrian adjusted

the prisoner's cloak whenever it looked like slipping: they didn't want him to be recognised and set upon by the crowd.

All day they went from one place to another, trying to find Divisional Headquarters. Nobody knew exactly where it was: the telephones were dead and useless. Service and supply units stood around idly, with nothing to do: the operational formations they served had gone forward into action, and nothing had been heard of them since. The stores and petrol dumps were still staffed and guarded, but nobody came to indent for supplies. The various headquarters and offices were full of clerks and storckkeepers and linesmen and so forth, all with nothing to do but play cards during the day and chase the local women at night.

In a corner, drunkenly, a guitar was thumbed and plonked: 'My friends, my friends, my dear fellow-citizens . . .'

'Hey, you: where is Divisional Headquarters?'

The man got up, swaying dizzily. 'Headquarters, eh? That's a good one; Headquarters! You won't find that lot in a hurry.'

Aircraft appeared overhead, but nobody bothered to take cover: they just gaped upwards. Machine-gun fire: that would be a Messerschmitt: crash, bang, and down it would come. 'What's the matter with you, laddie, don't tremble like that! Anyone would think your head still belonged to yourself. If a bullet's got your number on, it'll get you!' And this soldier laughed up at the murderous sky.

A black staff car came up and Menahem recognised the officer inside: General Pliskin, commanding the division. As before, the sight of the General made him feel vaguely uneasy; their eyes met, and the General furrowed his brow in the effort of remembering. Menahem came up and saluted smartly.

'Beg to report, sir: we've brought this German officer: he's a prisoner, we were told to bring him to Divisional Headquarters.'

The General opened the door of the car. 'Yes? Let me see the order.'

'Here, sir; and this letter was found on the prisoner.'

The German began speaking rapidly: the General took no notice of him, but opened and read the letter.

'Yes. Take him to Headquarters, and the letter too.' And he tossed the letter over, so that Menahem had to bend down and pick it up from the trampled snow: one closely-written sheet and a torn envelope with red seals.

'Report to the officer in charge at the Kaluga Street underground station. I shall be there later on this evening.' The General got back into his car and then beckoned Menahem across.

'We've met before, I think: your face seems familiar. What's your name?'

'Menahem Issakovitch.'

'Ah, yes. Report to me personally, we'll have a chat.'

Off they went, Adrian in front in a filthy temper, his fists knotted, staring savagely at the bricks and walls of the suffering city. A light mist hung over the streets, with domes and spires and cupolas seen dimly through it, hanging faintly against the sky. Then a party of soldiers came bawling round a corner. There was a food shop nearby, and they were collecting their unit's rations.

'Here, grandpa, do you know where this food shop is supposed to be?'

An old man was standing by a fence in a short quilted coat, combing his beard dreamily with his fingers.

'Food shop, eh? Well, I did hear something . . . yes, and I've seen army lorries here. But yesterday, you know, the armed guard was taken away: yes, those poor lads, they took them away, they did. . . . The truth is . . .' And the old man maundered on; but when the soldiers turned away impatiently he whispered a blessing after them, calling on the Mother of Christ and all the saints of Holy Russia.

This seemed to irritate one of the soldiers, who turned and yelled in his face: 'I see, you aren't going to tell us! You scared? We've got enemies all round us, apparently!' And he

threatened the empty street with his fist, cursing everybody and everything to the death and beyond.

Adrian left the pavement to go round this group, and on they went in the road, the prisoner behind him and Menahem and Zakhar in the rear. Zakhar kept prodding the German with his rifle: 'Come on, get moving, little Shitler!'

The prisoner marched smartly in obstinate silence, except that whenever Zakhar hit him with fist or rifle he would turn and stare at the two of them savagely. Once he tried to engage Menahem in conversation, but Menahem had ignored him, marching along tight-lipped and silent, controlling with difficulty a mad urge to bring up his cold gun and spatter the German's neck and the walls and everything around with a hail of cruel bullets. He clenched his hands tightly against the steel to control himself, bit his lips, took calm and sanity from the pain, regained command over that itch of hatred in his hands.

And so it was that Willy Ropp, that dignified and exalted staff officer in the Fuehrer's army, made his victory march into Moscow, striding proudly down her battered streets. True, his hands were tied; true, there were three Russian soldiers escorting him; true, he was masquerading in a dirty old tattered Russian greatcoat. But he was marching proudly as a German officer should, in good colour, with nothing of the prisoner about him. Prisoner, indeed! He was an envoy, an ambassador, conducting negotiations on behalf of the General Staff: when he came to the Russian headquarters, that fact would become more apparent; meanwhile, one could not expect these ape-men from the steppes to know what he was. It had been a bad moment, of course, when the Russian general had tossed his precious letter aside; but all was well, the letter had been picked up again, and here he was, marching importantly into Moscow.

He looked around in surprise at the church towers, the buildings, the sky: no sign of damage: what had the Luftwaffe been doing? A cold and resolute city, a cold and empty sky, the western horizon silent and misty. Where were the all-destroying Junkers; why no throbbing of Messerschmitt en-

gines; why no eighteen-bomb Heinkels; why no Stukas howling death and destruction?

He was worried: the city seemed so quiet, its heavy skies pressed down on him, his pace slackened. He pulled himself together and looked up again, his ears twitching slightly with expectation; but Adrian clouted him between the eyes.

'Looking for your bloody bombers, are you? Well, here they come! Look!'

The German flung himself down to take cover: but the aircraft that came over was a Russian one.

'Look, it's one of ours, not yours!'

Menahem came close, trigger-finger twitching. 'Get up!' he shouted in German. 'Get onto your feet, now, or I'll . . .'

The passers-by stopped and stared, curiously: but Adrian threatened them with his rifle. 'Out of the way, move along there!'

. . . Far away on the banks of the Danube, twelve kilometres from Ratisbon along the road to Wirth, the village of Sulzbach was still there: and among the peach and apricot orchards on a hillside overlooking the river, a certain warm and welcoming house still stood, with nearby a noble building of marble, approached by steps cut out of the living rock: 'Valhalla'. All around lay the forests of Bavaria, unbroken between Salzbach and Wirth: the hills and woods of home. From the house you could see the double spire of Ratisbon cathedral, with the blue Danube curling below it . . . What on earth was he doing in Moscow? What business had Willy Ropp with this silent city, this cold and alien sky? Who was this beetle-browed fellow with narrow shoulders and eyes full of hatred? Where were they taking him?

He leant against a telegraph pole and stared stupidly, dribbling, his eyes bloodshot; then he spoke, not arrogantly but in humble, awkward entreaty. 'Gentlemen, if you wouldn't mind untying my hands . . . I've lost the sensation in them. Please do it! I can hardly walk like this.' And he fell against the telegraph pole again.

'Come on, lambkins, get up!' Adrian said, bringing his fist up, while Zakhar scowled at the interested bystanders.

Menahem bent down, lifted the prisoner's coat, tried to untie his hands, but he couldn't do it: his fingers were too cold. Zakhar pulled a knife from its place in his boot and cut the straps: Adrian looked on disapprovingly.

The prisoner stood, lifted his swollen and blue hands to his face, and shook them, muttering despairingly.

'Quick march!'

The German looked at Menahem, and his lips moved silently.

'Quick march, I said!'

'I know what you are: you're a . . .' But Menahem cut him short with a furious shout:

'Yes, you're right! I'm a Jew!'

He was in a cold sweat of rage: his words were drowned by the roar of a passing lorry, and he started to laugh, a dreadful, mad, blazing, crackling laugh.

'Mikhail! What's the matter?'

He took no notice, but his insane laughter stopped suddenly, and he stared astonished at the heavy storm-clouds which seemed to be pressing down onto the Kremlin's towers, making the day strangely dark, the air murky.

He saw that Zakhar was holding his hand anxiously: their eyes met, and he was aware of affection and concern.

'Mikhail, what's the matter? You mustn't let yourself go like that! You've been overdoing it. That's what: I've never heard such ~~laugh~~ laugh, it was horrible, it made my blood run cold, it did.' And Zakhar crossed himself.

Adrian looked round too, his burly giant's face suddenly taking on the look of a distressed child: it upset him to see Menahem in that state, and tears gathered in his eyes.

They turned into a main road. A bus packed with women had stopped at a corner; labourers were clearing snow; a little girl ran out and stopped suddenly, shyly, like a fawn on the edge of the forest.

Round the corner came a body of men in civilian clothes, under military escort: they had picks and shovels, and some of them had slung bags of food on these tools; they were on their way to work at trenches and tank-traps, the outer defences of the city.

Two soldiers on crutches hopped across the street to where a basket of apples was on show in a shop window; but they were plaster apples, the shop was closed, and there was already a long queue of people waiting for it to open.

‘Look! A German!’

The people in the queue looked up: no threats, no violence, just a dull, silent stare. It was as if they were staring at one of the blind destructive forces of nature.

A patrol came up and halted before the prisoner: six Siberians in good uniforms. ‘Where are you going? Let’s see your papers!’

‘Here they are: we’re going to the Kaluga Street station.’ And as Menahem moved off he heard one of the Siberians saying: ‘Now, what sort of silly stuff might that be? Why don’t they just put a bullet into him?’

Shadows lurked in doorways, shutters fell noisily into place somewhere nearby. Men crouched in dark corners, unshaven, shaggy, wild-eyed, avoiding one another.

Like smoke over dying embers, the storm-clouds pressed down on Moscow.

Chapter Five

AN elderly lady, her eyes still lively and her expression still contented in spite of the way she had been treated in the food queue, made her way home to the front door of a big house in Makhovaya Street. Her white shawl hung loose and a wisp of grey hair fell across the weariness of her face; she paused for a moment, assailed by giddiness, the air turning and the town swaying all round her as she stood in the doorway. It seemed darker than usual in the hall, perhaps because of those ominous low clouds, perhaps because the current had been cut off and half the door boarded up: there was no sign of life indoors or on the stairs, and she groped forward step by step, feeling for the walls. Her eyes grew used to the darkness, and then she saw a human shape, dimly: it was the hall porter, lurking in a side doorway, peering out at her narrowly, recognizable in the gloom by his squat, bent shape. He must have been taking shelter in the cellar.

He had changed a lot during the last few weeks. At first he had stopped speaking to her; then he started ignoring her presence altogether; now he had taken to fixing her with a hard, malevolent stare when they met, but still in silence. She had known him now for fifteen years, and until recently he had always been as cheerful and friendly as one could wish. What had happened? What was the point of all this lurking in shadows, this sly, malevolent peering? In a moment of terror she slipped out again into the street: had she really seen a knife gleaming at the top of his boot?

She looked around, irresolutely: should she go back to the bread shop? The queue would be shorter now, and there was practically no bread at home; her grandchildren, waiting for

her at home, would be hungry; she had been away from them too long.

So back she trudged to the shop and the queue, and a kind neighbour saw her and made room for her.

Why did you go away, Mme Korina? You were here early this morning, one of the first, weren't you?

'Thank you, my dear, you're very kind. Yes, I had to go away because . . . well . . .'

She took her half-loaf of hard bread and went home, and found the porter standing across the front door, facing the street: an ape-like figure, his arms swinging, his back bent, his features twisted into a malevolent grimace as he moved over to let the old lady in. Like all his kind, he kept the people in the house under close observation, and made regular reports about them to the police.

In the old days he had always been most respectful towards the whole Korin family: the men were serving officers, the women were in important administrative posts, and the old woman was very regular with a tip for him on the first day of every month.

But now Mme Korina went up the stairs hurriedly, listening nervously, trying to reassure herself that she was quite safe but knowing better in her heart. Yes, Zinin the porter had changed all right; everybody had changed; even the streets looked different. Thirty years had gone by, she thought, and once again they were here, creeping out from their holes and hiding-places: she remembered them too well, their feverish urgency, the hatred in their eyes, their impatience for the great day to come in all its majesty and blood. Well, that great day was approaching now, here in Moscow, and quickly: its dawn gleamed redly in the eyes of people like those in the queue, or the porter. Any day now, they were thinking and muttering; and some of them said it openly, shouted it out drunkenly in the streets, and nobody cared.

Times were changing, all right. Nobody bothered to read government propaganda now; they had heard it all before, knew it by heart, passed by listlessly, waiting for the day.

So now Moscow was like one of its own old houses, the plaster cracking and crumbling away under the stress of war, the old sad colours showing through once more.

The Korinas lived on the first floor in five rooms, designed originally for a single family but now occupied by several. One room belonged to Mme Korina's eldest son, with his wife and two children, and another to her second son, who had married a Tartar woman from Kazan and also had two children. The older boy had been divorced, and his wife had married again: she lived in the third room with her Georgian husband and their child. The other two rooms were small, Mme Korina and her daughter, Anna, had these. But as the men had all been called up and the women went to work in offices and factories, Mme Korina found herself left alone all day to look after the children; only in the evenings and the early mornings did the whole clan come together in the kitchen they shared. During the day the children lived peacefully together as a single family, chattering together in Russian as though they were all of one racial origin.

Mme Korina came in, and they gathered round her: 'Here's grandma! Lovely bread, lovely bread!'

Oleg was the eldest, six years old and fair: Fatima, dark and slant-eyed, was only three. In between came Sasha, Zina, and Alexandra. Their grandmother kissed them all and shared the bread out fairly.

'Grandma, why are you crying? I'll tell my mummy!'

They quietened down to eat, and the old lady lit a little oil lamp in the kitchen and settled down on a stool to read from a worn old book. It was only midday, but the kitchen was always dark.

They heard a noise in the street outside: an armoured car, perhaps: then footsteps on the stairs. Mme Korina had locked and chained the door: there was knocking, but she refused to open. 'Who is it? What do you want?' Eventually footsteps receded.

'Grandma, you're frightened!' Sasha said. 'Look at me, I'm not frightened!'

'Why should you be frightened, Sasha? A dear little girl like you!' And the old lady clung affectionately to her grandchild: no real grandchild of hers, her step-grandchild rather. Her eyes were full of sadness and tears and the passing of time.

Two wounded soldiers burst suddenly out of a side-street: one tall and bony, his arm tied in splints, the other short and thick-set and on crutches. They dashed and hopped out into the middle of the nearly deserted street and yelled: 'There's German tanks in Kaluga Street and Piasetchno! They're in Moscow already, they're coming this way! Watch out, everybody, get moving!'

There was an armed patrol in the street, six men, three of them in army coats and three in N.K.V.D. uniform: they halted by a wide gateway and started to edge cautiously towards the cover it offered, not speaking, just looking around and at one another with apprehensive vigilance. One of them, a short man in a long coat and spurred boots, unslung his tommy-gun and held it ready. They stood in the shadowy gateway and watched the road.

The shouts of the two wounded men re-echoed between the houses, and people looked out in alarm. 'Run! Take cover! The Germans are coming!'

Shops began to close, shutters clanged down, people gathered on the pavement.

'What's all this?'

'Tanks! German tanks!'

'What, did you actually see them yourself?'

'Of course I did. Can't you hear them?'

'He must be deaf! They're here already! Thank God!'

An old man started to cross himself repeatedly.

The two wounded men moved to a corner and the tall one gesticulated vaguely with his one good hand. 'There they are, the Germans!'

His face was crimson; there was blood leaking through his bandages. People crowded around them with shouts of alarm and disaster. One man flung down his shovel and cried:

‘That’s the lot, it’s all over; we’ve had enough, the time’s come at last!’

The six men who had been on armed patrol slid quietly inside the porch where they were hiding; a moment later they came out unarmed and bare-headed, their badges stripped off, and tried to creep away inconspicuously along by the wall.

‘Here, where are you lot off to? No caps? Where’ve you come from, the front, where?’

They shook their heads.

‘Look, all of you — here’s the security people on the run! The N.K.V.D. and all!’

‘Running off like rats, eh?’

‘Let them run! We’ll be able to find them again!’

‘Yes, they’ll get it all right, they’ll get what’s coming to them — all of that sort will.’

A few war-workers came by, grimy from the night shift: they stopped and looked on at the tension of the moment, and one of them wiped sudden tears away with a filthy handkerchief and burst out: ‘Just look at them! Our own people, look what they’ve been through!’

A lorry came up, stopped, hooted, but could not get by. Slowly the crowd sorted itself out and moved, those two wounded men in front, with several women behind them and then, raggedly, the others, joined by porters and others from the houses in the street.

‘Where’s everybody going?’

‘Haven’t you heard? — the Germans are in Moscow already!’

‘The Germans? — No!’ with wringing of hands.

‘God preserve us!’

‘We’re going to find them — they’re not far off.’

‘Yes, and the Germans look after people, they’ve got bread and they give it out.’

‘That’s right, they don’t harm ordinary, honest men.’

A swarm of boys, fourteen and fifteen years old, came off factory duty down a side-street and joined their elders noisily.

A white flag appeared suddenly, flapping over the crowd: a rough, black swastika had been painted on it. An uncertain

silence fell: the crowd started back, the sky and the streets and the urgency all seemed frozen for a moment, and even the white flag hung limp.

But the man who had raised it went on brazenly: 'Down with Communism! Death to the Jews!'

A single shot rang out from a dark alley, and the crowd surged forward again over the snow in the gathering dusk, a dark tumult of people; and now many of them found crosses and white flags with swastikas to hold up and wave. Some even wore Nazi arm-bands. Patrols, meeting this new kind of crowd, melted away discreetly to one side.

'The war's over!'

'Thank Christ and his Blessed Mother!'

On they pressed, purposefully though without direction: Moscow seemed to be open and defenceless before them. There were soldiers among them now, deserters from the front and from the armies massed in the railway yards and barracks, men who had been wandering for days and taking shelter in the stations, hungry and ragged, barefoot and lousy. And there were respectable citizens too, dark coats with fur collars, Party members, spectacled intellectuals in raincoats.

A man in a sheepskin bonnet jumped up onto a lorry and started to address the crowd: 'Fellow citizens of Holy Russia. . . .' A passer-by looked at him angrily, and was immediately knocked flying by one of the crowd. 'Take that, Jew-boy!'

'A Jew! Kill the lot of them!'

And then the street trembled with a deep, ragged sound of singing: the old Tsarist anthem of Russia.

'Hats off!'

For Zinin the porter this was the great and long-awaited day: now he would be able to drive the Zorins, the whole brood of them, out of those five rooms on the first floor. The cellar was good enough for them! And out at Doroshuvko, near Arekhorozievo, his own good brick house was still standing, though at present the village soviet was still in possession . . .

well, there'd be good times coming now, he'd be able to do well now.

'What are they singing?' a small girl asked.

'Child, child, don't you know? We old people, we've never forgotten that hymn: it's been locked up in our hearts all these years.'

Down Sadovaya Street they went filling it from side to side, then down the Victory Parade: paper swastikas were being given out, and people wore them on their lapels and sleeves.

In a corner beside a doorway an old man knelt, bareheaded and weeping.

'What's happened to the military police? Where are the N.K.V.D.? The security forces, all those Siberians?'

'They've hidden, they've run away.'

'What's the matter, aren't they good Christian Russians like the rest of us?'

'The Kremlin's surrounded: Stalin's got away: come on, Russia, it's time to move!'

A thin wrinkled man stood and shook his fists at the world, his face twitching.

The lorry was still behind the crowd, still unable to get through. The driver had climbed down several times, unable to make up his mind: should he turn back or stay put? But now there was a second crowd pressing behind him; so he went aside to a door and leant against it in his sheepskin coat, fingering the revolver at his black belt. 'Then a last look at the disappearing crowd, and he abandoned his lorry and nipped down an alley.

Under the dim evening light the snow lay dark, flecked with the scarlet of torn-up Party cards: bloodstains from a mortally-wounded wild beast.

'Ah, to hell with it!' he cried, and flung something from him passionately. His gun-belt hanging loose, he pushed his fur hat to the back of his head and started to run desperately in the deserted street, not towards the marching crowd but the other way, towards where the Kremlin's towers loomed faintly in the dusk.

Menahem came to Sadovaya Street with Adrian and Zakhar and the German prisoner, and there in the distance they saw that crowd milling over the roadway, the white banners like the sails of a ship storm-tossed in the darkness.

What could all this be, they wondered: people wounded in an air-raid? Why this roaring sound, a metallic reverberation of angry bells?

'Adrian, Adrian, what's this? That white thing down there?'

Adrian tensed angrily, his eyes narrow, his face distorted: he said nothing.

Zakhar caught Menahem by the hand: his face and voice were corpse-like. 'Mikhail, they must be here, they've come. . . .'

Menahem flared up, his eyes suddenly aflame beneath those heavy black brows. The Germans! He reached for his sub-machine-gun and his fingers caressed the icy metal of its magazine: no, it was impossible; the swastika, flying over Moscow! Oh, God! Adrian, Zakhar . . . Frolitch . . . He muttered desperately to himself, and suddenly realised that the German was laughing, his shoulders shaking, his arm rising to the Nazi salute.

What was he saying? What was that single word he kept mouthing towards the approaching crowd, a single word like a dog's bark at night?

'Heil! Heil!'

Him, the prisoner? And was that just an echo, or was it the crowd returning his cry? - or heaven, perhaps, shouting back in mockery? Were Adrian and Zakhar taking up that cry, were the cold stones of Moscow joining in? No, no, no: it was just Willy Ropp, their prisoner, but now he was striding out confidently to meet the flag of surrender, the Nazi emblem held up before him. 'Heil!'

Menahem stopped and pulled the trigger, feeling the lovely pain and violence of his gun's rattle and roar: a blaze of savage delight filled him, his head was on fire.

The German fell, face downwards in the snow, his arm still raised: Menahem shot and shot until his magazine was empty.

‘Zahkar! — Fire!’ Adrian bellowed.

The crowd swayed to a standstill, as if they had come up against a brick wall: their swastikas shook in the wind.

Adrian stepped forward and emptied his magazine into that solid mass of people. ‘Fire, can’t you, you two!’

But Menahem closed his eyes, unable to watch the others at this cold-blooded butchery of a Russian crowd.

‘Come along, Mikhail!’ And now the three of them were running, their guns unloaded. Menahem fumbled for one of the two spare magazines in his pouch, tugged uselessly at the straps, eventually tore them apart with his teeth; the cold metal scorched his shaking hands, he couldn’t get his gun loaded. What had happened to the crowd? The street seemed empty, but there were bits of dark rag scattered about on the pavements, in the road: men? Merciful Father in heaven: men? Citizens of Holy Russia? Struck blind? — But why all this blood, the street swimming with blood, its whole length soured in red? Ah yes, these were Party membership cards, torn up and tossed around by the wind . . . no doubt those people had all been Party members!

So Menahem came to where the lorry had been abandoned and stopped there, shuddering, while Adrian sat collapsed and silent in a shop doorway, not seeing the others, his eyes quite empty of all light and warmth.

Then the six men of the patrol crept back, found their caps and their weapons and became soldiers again: and from every side other armed parties approached.

In another street, close at hand, there was a long noisy rattle of firing. Doors were shut everywhere, and people peered out apprehensively at the empty street.

Zinin the porter did not manage to reach 59 Makhovaya Street; he fell only a few doors away, the snow stained darkly beside him.

It was dark when Menahem, Adrian and Zakhar resumed their journey through the dead and empty streets of Moscow. They walked heavily, guns dangling, eyes cast down at the

trampled grey snow. Menahem's coat was undone: he had lost his cap and his side-pack. The cold meant nothing to him: his eyeballs felt swollen, so that he could hardly blink, and his head seemed cased in ice.

At almost every corner they were stopped and asked for their papers. Menahem still had his written orders from General Pliskin and also the letter taken from the German officer.

The night was silent: aircraft throbbed distantly, and searchlights swayed and flickered against a lowering and oily sky.

The three men trudged on in silence. Then, far off, they heard the grumble of artillery. Ah, they thought, it's still going on: nothing has changed since yesterday.

Two armoured cars went by noisily, their dark gun-ports scrutinising the street.

'Halt, there! Papers?'

Menahem passed them across. Torchlight shone in his face, and he stood to attention.

'Well, you're a fine sight. Where's your cap? Pull yourself together!'

Menahem buttoned his coat up, suddenly aware of the cold.

'Where are you from?'

'Makhovaya Street,' Adrian answered hoarsely. These were his first words since the shooting. 'We were escorting a prisoner, an officer, and we met a pack of Nazis, Russian-style Nazis, traitors; it cheered him up, that German, when he saw them, and we had to teach him a lesson.'

'Yes, I've heard about this,' the officer answered. 'So you were the ones who first stood up to that mob, were you? Excellent: good lads. I'll take you to headquarters. Well, they caught it, that lot did; not one of them got away alive.'

This officer belonged to a special unit, responsible for the security of headquarters and military establishments. He took Menahem by the arm and called the other two over. 'Let me give you a bit of good advice: don't go talking to your friends about what you've seen today. Tell the people at headquarters, yes; but everywhere else, bear it in mind, there's complete

peace and order all over Moscow, no troubles of any kind. . . .'
He broke off and addressed Menahem: 'What are you, what's your nationality?'

'I'm a Jew.'

'A Jew, eh? That makes it quite clear: your lot are the only ones we can really trust just now.'

They came to an underground station: there were sentries and barbed wire everywhere.

'Where's this?'

'This is the entrance to the Kaluga Street underground station. We've arrived: this is Divisional Headquarters.'

The Soviet High Command used two places as concentration points for the mass of recruits pouring in from all over the country: these centres were at Zagorsk to the north of Moscow and Yegorovsk-Riazan to the south-east, and there the unceasing torrent of men was marshalled roughly into units and sent forward to join the immense throng to the west of the city, along the Volkolomosk road and around the Dubosekovo station. They went on foot, unceasingly; some of them had no uniforms, only a promise of uniforms when a delivery came from the factories. At night they would be given a dry ration supposed to last three days, and then they would be sent forward at once, across the cold wastes of snow, straight into the thunder and power of the German guns.

For five days now the Germans had been concentrating on a narrow sector of the front, and so most of the Russian recruits went there, a steady stream of them, hour by hour. The German aircraft were grounded by the weather, and the Russian anti-aircraft guns waited for them, alert and ready: but the artillery fire went on and on without stopping, six-barrelled mortars, 203 mm. howitzers, the lot, an unceasing barrage, but quite insufficient to stop the continual reinforcement of the Russian defences. The men had to be sent forward: they could not be kept back at the concentration points, where there was no food or shelter for them. So forward they went, regardless: untrained because all the officers were in

the front line, and without uniforms apart from ragged old greatcoats.

They swarmed over the whole region of Moscow, moving to the west by every road and track and alley and path. There, to the west of the city, they were expecting to find all they needed: there would be food, they had been told, plenty of food and warm clothing, and brandy, and guns. It wasn't far now: keep going! But when they actually reached those western suburbs of the city, what they actually found was that grim line of Siberians, the security troops, well-fed and well-clothed: and so, with no chance of rest or food, forward they had to go into action.

The desperate battle to save Moscow was being directed by the headquarters staff of the 316th Infantry Division. The Commander-in-Chief of the Red Army had personally drawn up the plan for breaking the German attack; and now, hour by hour, he sat receiving reports of what was happening out along the Volkolomosk road.

When Menahem, Adrian, and Zakhar reported at Divisional Headquarters, news had just come in that the German artillery barrage had ceased: the six-barrelled mortars and the big howitzers were silent. Apparently they had run out of ammunition: German supplies were unable to come through from Smolensk, since the railway lines had been destroyed and trains and convoys blown up by Russian partisans in the rear. During the autumn fighting around Smolensk and Rzhev, various Red Army units had been surrounded and cut off; but they kept their discipline, took to the forests, and fought independently behind the German lines with only one task: to destroy the Germans. And they worked hard at it, so much so that even while making their grand assault on Moscow, the Germans felt surrounded or encircled themselves, and then found their supplies threatened, so that they had to shoot sparingly instead of in a steady barrage, day and night.

The underground station had been rebuilt as a command centre. Menahem and the others came down a marble staircase

and along a passage gleaming with red stone. The wide lavish staircase, the cold veined marble, the great solid pillars supporting the massive ceiling, the polished flagstones, everything well lit and gleaming — all this made Menahem feel safe and secure, and restored his faith in the solidity and stability of Moscow. There was a silence of orderly and purposeful activity, with telephones ringing, spurred boots jangling, doors opening and closing: an atmosphere to renew one's faith and peace of mind. Keen eyes were watching, he felt, understanding all that happened: steely hands kept the destiny of the city under firm and assured control.

Zakhar slipped on the glossy floor and clutched at Menahem's arm for support.

'Just look at this: what luxury, eh? A palace underground, just like in the fairy stories!'

'Don't be a fool, Zakhar,' Adrian said. 'This is only an underground station, and now it's been made into a headquarters. The Germans can't bomb us here! There's yards and yards of concrete on top of us.'

The three of them were taken first to the Political Office of the division. The Political Commissar, Nikolai Fyodorovitch Zhilin, studied the letter brought by the German prisoner: he smiled more broadly as he read, and finally he burst out laughing.

Beside him sat a bald officer, trying to get through to somewhere on the telephone. 'Lightning calling, Lightning calling: are you receiving me, Tempest? Are you there, Tempest?'

Zhilin the Commissar was in high good humour; he paced up and down, waving the letter. 'These Germans! They promise to spare the Lenin Mausoleum, the Kremlin, all the historical monuments of Moscow; they've made a fine neat list here, of all the things they kindly promise to spare, and they're quite ready to take over, except that they're willing to allow us a few days to get out before they march in: and they're going to be ever so nice and gentle with our officers and our

people. Ha! Yes, we're supposed to take Paris as an example and Warsaw as a warning!

He stopped in front of Adrian and shook him energetically by the shoulder. 'Well, my brave lad, my brave Russian soldier, have you understood what they're getting at?'

'I have, Comrade Commissar!'

'You understand; splendid!' And he stared into Adrian's eyes. 'What's your name?'

'Adrian.'

'Right, then, Adrian, you just listen to me. What they're asking for is Moscow: they want us to give them our holy city on a silver plate, and then we have their kind permission to go away!' He laughed uproariously, but his eyes had a vicious look in them. 'Well, this calls for an answer: tell me, Adrian, what sort of answer should we give them, these Germans, these bloody snake-shit bastard Germans, eh?'

'We should answer with bullets, Comrade Commissar!'

The bald-headed officer was still fighting his telephone. 'Tempest, are you there? Why don't you answer, Tempest? I can't hear you! Cragstone calling: your orders have been despatched to you! Tempest, are you there, damn your eyes? Cragstone calling! . . .'

Then, in another room, the three men gave a full account once again of how the prisoner had been captured and handed over to them, and how they had taken him through the streets, and how he had run forward towards the crowd with their banners of surrender.

A clerk took their statements down carefully in writing and made them sign. Then they were sent away to a holding unit to await re-posting to new duties.

And while the three of them were safely occupied at Divisional Headquarters, their friends from Tengushai went forward, to the west of Moscow, into the murderous hail of German bullets.

Menahem now had to find General Pliskin and report to him, as ordered. The search was a long one: first he was sent

to the Political Section, then to a special security section, then to the officer of the guard. For hours he sat and waited on the marble stairs, his head on his hands, while the stone floor rang with the comings and goings of staff officers: the staircase was festooned with telephone wires, running down and into various closed doors, and occasionally one of these doors would open and a shaft of light and a buzz of telephone conversation would stream out to where Menahem was sitting.

The other two lay and dozed in a corner on the stone floor, Adrian stretched out with his eyes half open, Zakhar crouched down with his thick hair against his knees. There were soldiers about, some of them reading a paper together; a Don Cossack waited in fur cap and blue coat; there were colonels, captains, and common soldiers — runners, telephonists, signals men with tools and coils of wire.

A door opened, and a voice called: there was movement in the corner, and someone got up from among the dozing men.

‘Sidorenko!’

The Don Cossack rose slowly, did up his tunic, pulled his belt straight and made for the open door. Silence fell again. Outside, the sentries were relieved, with a rattle of weapons, and then the sentries inside the station in their turn.

Early, before dawn, Menahem was called to meet the General. At once his tiredness left him and he felt wide awake, full of a cool early-morning briskness.

It was a large room, with walls of marble: a portrait of Stalin was displayed prominently, and on the table a map was spread out.

The General kept Menahem waiting at the open door for a few minutes, and then: ‘Come closer; so you’re the man who brought that prisoner in, are you? Haven’t we met before?’ And without waiting for an answer, he clapped his hand to Menahem’s shoulder. ‘Yes, I remember now; I saw the fellow’s letter. It was you who showed it to me, I think: apparently the Germans are asking us to hand Moscow over to them!’

His dark eyes glowed, his face was wrinkled and shadowed:

a man in his fifties, tall, broad, with prominent cheekbones, a high forehead, a thin hooked nose. 'You were the first to shoot at the German?'

Menahem answered at once, without pausing to think. 'Yes, I was the first to start the shooting on Makhovaya Street yesterday.'

'What's your name?'

'Menahem Issakovitch.'

'Yes, I thought it was you: I've got it clear now. Well, you will have to bear it in mind, what the Germans are doing to you, what they are capable of doing if they get hold of you, a lad of your sort. Bear it in mind! It's the same for me, I keep my own race and my origin in my mind's eye the whole time; and I'm very glad, very glad indeed to see . . .' He paused. 'I am glad to see Jews at the front, and especially glad when they're Polish Jews.'

And when Menahem was at the door on the way out, the General dropped into Yiddish and said: 'Go back to the front, with these wonderful Russian people: they've given you a gun, the best present that any nation ever gave to the Jews. So there's your job, killing Germans: get on with it!'

A telephone rang and a sentry came in: Menahem felt the General's warm handshake, and then he was off and up the stairs, to find Adrian and Zakhar and be on their way. Down below there had been no sign of daylight, but they came out into a cold wind and driving snow, and found a big open square before them, a place of grey snow and bare trees, shadowed by walls and a faint filigree of telegraph wires, with people moving through the morning cold like ghosts, deeply wrapped in their furs and their silence.

The three men were free for the rest of the day: they were to report to their new unit in the evening; they were authorised to draw two days' rations from divisional stores and to get a mid-day meal also at an officers' mess. The food store would not be open for another hour, but a queue had formed already: Zakhar was an expert at queues, and he was already well established in his place.

Menahem took out the note Anna had given him, and read the address for the hundredth time: 59, Makhovaya Street.

They sat on some steps and ate their breakfast: rye bread, a scrape of marmalade, a dried fish. Then they rose and went their different ways into the streets of Moscow, having arranged to meet at the officers' mess for their lunch.

Adrian went off to Arbat, to find a café he remembered from a year ago, before the war: there had been a waitress there, a dark-eyed wildcat from Tambov, Zina Karpovna by name; she would be worth looking up again. Zakhar wanted to see the Uspensky Convent in Red Square: he had to see it, he explained, or otherwise he would have no tales to tell in the years after the war. All the old people in his village used to talk about the Uspensky Convent, its cupolas of pure silver, its gilded doors, its arches and towers: he wanted to see the tower of Ivan the Great and its great bell for himself. These bells rang no longer, their copper clappers had come down, they were dumb; but still a sound of weeping came from them at night and could be heard for miles around, as the angels and saints came down to brush the bells with their wings. Or so people said: but now a rumour was going about that the great bell had fallen and been smashed on the stones a week ago. This couldn't be true: the fact that the Germans had failed to take Moscow was proof of it.

Menahem moved restlessly along the street, unable to compose himself, stopping from time to time to stare at the passers-by. He felt like accosting them: weren't they Jews too, couldn't he recognise that walk, that look in the eyes, that restlessness?

'We intend no harm towards the Russian people; we only wish to destroy the Jews. Why do you persist in fighting for their sake, when they are the people responsible for the war? Do you really want to fight and die in battle, simply in order that Jews may live?'

So the leaflets had run, dropped yesterday from aircraft. The street sweepers had hastened to gather them up, but still the word got around, and the air was full of impressed

whisperings. Nobody used the word 'Jews', however: it was always simply 'they' or occasionally 'the Yids'.

The shadow of the swastika seemed to be hanging over the streets of Moscow, vicious and threatening as a snake.

And so, on this grey and misty morning towards the end of November, Menahem went tramping the streets of the city, along grey walls and under grey bare trees, his face open and his head held high, his eyes full of ease and good nature. He wanted to be among people, to speak to them, to hear the sound of his own voice, to greet other men as a friend: a foreigner and a Jew, he felt part of this town, of these streets that he had trodden for the first time yesterday. Moscow belonged to him, he felt, as he walked her streets in his heavy grey coat, his gun slung, his magazine ready to hand.

A young face, one would think, though dark with several days' growth of beard: eyes wide and alert; a Jewish boy from Poland, only twenty-two years old.

From Poland: from a little Jewish settlement, a short walk down a chestnut avenue from the village of Poszvientne, where there was a stream with rapids, a windmill too. Leahka, the tinker's daughter, wore black plaits: his father would sing the old songs of Poland; the village schoolmaster always had a catch in his voice when he read the poems of Kochanovsky. Then there was Yadviga, pretty Yadviga, and because of her he couldn't sleep at night: and what about the great annual fair, which always ended in rowdiness and violence? And in the village churches, young couples would get married . . . But then, the sudden disaster: and afterwards Tengushai, the hay harvests, nights spent in the huts of bearded Russian peasants who told old tales of forest and field. Lioska: Ivan Ivanovitch: the long march across Russia — oh, Frolitch, what was it that happened in these Moscow streets? Is the chestnut avenue at home quite lost behind these vast terrible pine-woods of the Volga? Yadviga seemed to have vanished now, her face hardly remembered, while Lioska kept returning — Lioska, daughter of Russia and the Volga. Here they were,

the country people of Russia, working in their fields, moving along their endless forest tracks, whispering at night from their warm stoves, with him all the time: but in the heart of his memory, like a jewel in tarnished silver, the image of home and the dear remote earth of Poland remained intact.

Now, in the streets of Moscow, nobody took any notice of this lanky youth as he dreamt his way along: there were soldiers everywhere, staff officers mostly, all preoccupied with their affairs, many of them just coming off night duty. Carts and lorries and tanks went by, busily and noisily. Menahem looked closely at the people and found them gloomy and sullen: look at this chap, for example, this soldier with his snub nose and his broad face, his twitching nostrils, his furtive piggy eyes! But then an old man stopped and dropped his glasses: Menahem picked them up, and was thanked profusely while the old man was wiping the snow and dirt off them — ‘Thank you, my boy, thank you, thank you!’ — and as he looked at the old wrinkled forehead, the swollen eyelids, the blue trembling lips, Menahem was suddenly reminded of happy peaceful things, sunshine on children playing, his own father’s face, so long ago! ‘He might almost be my father!’ he thought, and wanted to run after the old fellow and talk to him about anything, anything at all.

Things were quiet now in Makhovaya Street; whatever had happened yesterday, there was no trace of it. Occasionally a light tank went rattling down the road, its treads sending the snow flying; armed patrols moved around at a steady set pace. There was bread in several of the shops, plenty of bread and no queues: Menahem bought himself half a loaf. The street was almost deserted: there were very few footprints in the fresh snow.

Menahem took out Anna’s note and checked the address once again: here was number 59, so in he went and paused for a moment while his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness of the hall, lit only by a single window, narrow and high up.

He rang for some time and then heard footsteps: a hoarse voice echoed out in the passage. ‘Who is it?’

‘I’m a soldier, and I’ve brought a letter.’

There was a moment’s silence, then many small voices: the door opened, Menahem handed the letter in and stepped back. ‘I’m sorry to bother you: I’m just on my way through Moscow, and I’ve brought that letter from Anna Samoilovna.’

The old woman was hunting for her glasses, groping in the pockets of her black coat and not finding them: but when she heard her daughter’s name she started to shake uncontrollably, and opened the door wide so that the thin daylight shone into the passage where Menahem was standing. He wanted to go, but found it difficult. Had they not heard from Anna until now? Hadn’t she written?

The old woman turned back to Menahem, and now he saw her face and at once felt a burning happiness: he knew that face so well, every line of it!

‘Come in, come in: why stand about outside?’ And she took him by the arm and led him into a big airy room with a fine window: children came running from all directions.

‘Uncle, uncle!’ cried a fair child of six: this was Oleg, the eldest. He ran his fingers in awe over Menahem’s gun and whispered excitedly to the slant-eyed little girl beside him.

Menahem sat, the gun across his knees, and smiled at the children. Their grandmother was busy in the kitchen, making tea for the visitor, arranging the big, nickel-plated samovar: in her excitement, she still had not found her glasses.

‘Sashka, Sashka, go and look for my glasses: I’m sure you’ll be able to find them!’ she called from the kitchen, but in her impatience still tried to read the letter without them.

‘What a lot of grandchildren!’ Menahem thought as he stroked their heads and made friends. Zina alone stood apart and moodily by the door, not offering her hand, watching the soldier distrustfully, fingers in her mouth.

Mme Korina brought in the steaming samovar and put it on the table, and made herself busy in motherly fashion in the steam of it, her pale bony hands active with her arrangements. It seemed a very long time since Menahem had sat down to a

proper meal, with tea correctly made in glasses, and teaspoons, and dishes of jam and everything.

The children knelt at a low table and quickly gobbled up the plum jam put out for them in saucers. They said nothing, there was only the singing of the samovar; and suddenly, in Menahem's mind, this sound became the mournful whistle of a railway engine, moving off to an immense distance along unending rails, disturbing the sleep of weary soldiers in a sad, lost station somewhere. Then older images rose before him: Jewish homes on the Vistula and the Plonka; his mother in front of the lighted Sabbath candles, her face hidden in those gentle hands of hers: snow-white tablecloths for festival days; the silver candlesticks, embossed with leaping stags. All lost, lost for ever: nothing left but the tear that was gathering in his eye.

Perhaps Mme Korina saw the gleam of it: she stopped reading Anna's letter and came closer to Menahem and said: 'Anna has been to see us since writing this letter. She's worried about you. She's in Moscow now, working at the hospital in Bolshoya Kaluzheska. But she can't often come to see me, there are too many wounded men.'

Menahem got up impatiently: there might just be time to see her.

'Is it far from here?'

'No, not far.'

There was a little iron bed with a green quilt over it, and a mandoline was hanging from the wall above, decorated with coloured ribbons. On a small bookcase beside the bed was the drawing he had made of Anna at the field hospital. He felt acutely aware of her presence.

'Anna talked a lot about you.' The old lady was thawing out, becoming more friendly. 'Where do you come from?'

'From Poland: I'm a Jew.'

'I can see you are, my dear boy, I can always tell. Well, God help us all!' She spoke now in Yiddish, sighing heavily, and her eyes were wet.

'Don't cry: there's no need to cry: the Germans aren't going

to capture Moscow!' But Menahem had to turn away from her sharply, towards the window, to conceal and stifle his own tears. He looked out and recognised the street where he had only yesterday been escorting the prisoner. That broken-down lorry was still there: that shop was still shut: only the crowd with the swastikas had gone.

'I know this road. I was here yesterday.'

'Yesterday?' She was astonished.

'We were the ones who broke it up.'

The old lady wrung her hands. 'It's too much: my sons and my daughter, they're all fighting; my daughters-in-law are doing war work in factories and offices: yet still there has to be this hatred.' And she told him about the porter, the episode of the bread queue, everything; until she saw Menahem's distress in the trembling of his lips, and felt a sudden, overwhelming sorrow for him too.

'You know, my dear, they thought it was all over, they thought they could go ahead already . . . Well, may God in His mercy arrange it so that the day never comes! None of our people would be spared, none at all. . . . Look at the children, my grandchildren: well, I'm a rich woman, aren't I, to have all these grandchildren? Some of them aren't my own blood in fact, but I count them as mine, they're all the same in my eyes, and . . .'

Now she had started, she could not stop: on and on flowed the torrent of Yiddish, long pent up in her heart.

'Come and see us, come often: you must come every time you're in Moscow, won't you, Menahem, Mikhail?'

And then, when the big door was open, she added: 'Anna will be glad to see you.'

Menahem felt restless, choking, close to tears as he walked quickly along, not looking about him, grasping the cold metal of his gun: it was his treasure, it was all he had left, apart from a troubled and suffering Jewish heart and a body long and thin, a mere sapling in the winds of the world.

He went down this street and that street and then stopped

at a crossroads. 'Can you tell me, where's the Bolshoya Kaluzheska Hospital?'

'You're standing in front of it.'

He ran for the hospital entrance, not stopping to thank the helpful stranger. 'Where's the guard, who's in charge? I'm looking for Dr. Anna Samoilovna Korina!' Up the stairs he went, and past a waiting-room: so many doors, so many nurses; where was Anna? A soldier in a hospital coat came limping by, and then an inert shape was pushed by on a trolley, covered over with a white cloth.

'I'm looking for Dr. Anna Samoilovna Korina!'

'Oh: who are you?'

'My name's Mikhail, I'm a soldier: she'll know!'

'You'll have to give your name, but we can't bother her now, she's in the operating theatre.' This was a young woman, pale and severe: she blocked Mcnahem's path and showed him where to wait.

He sat and stared at a blank white door in front of him. What was he doing in this corridor? Who had brought him here? Anna?

Images blurred in his mind: the vast snowfields, this white and clinical corridor, the face of Mme Korina, the stairs at Makhovaya Street. And Anna: what did she look like? He remembered his pencil skipping and sliding on the white paper, teasing out the likeness of her, while he stared at her in utter concentration, picking out her forehead, her high, clear, young brow, and then the ivory of her nose, the mist of her eyelashes, her eyelids and pupils: then his gaze fell to her long, slender neck, and he felt like a bird of prey before the summer ripeness of her beauty.

He sat for a long time, while doors opened and closed and footsteps echoed and people came and went before him: he seemed apart, watching the life of the hospital through thick glass. Nobody took any notice of him: he felt as if he had been caught in a net, or captured by the disciplinarian hand of the girl who had made him sit here by the white door and wait for ever. No, he would go! But his great boots shook the

place and left wet marks behind, so he tried to walk on tip-toe to make less noise. Here was the big glazed door leading to the staircase and the street. What on earth was he doing in this place? Anna? Who was Anna? He had met hundreds of people: was he going to go round looking them all up? On he went.

But then the pale and severe young nurse spoke again. 'Anna Samoilovna, here is the soldier who was asking for you.'

He heard light quick footsteps coming towards him. 'Did you want to speak to me?' But when he turned his unshaven face to meet her eyes, with a sudden sensation of the corridor swaying and a million doors opening, she spoke differently. 'Mikhail! . . . I didn't recognise you!'

He found himself sitting at a low white table in her room. She unbuttoned his greatcoat and smoothed his hair: one black lock had strayed down across his left eye. Then she busied herself neatly about the room: there was a tinkle of cups and an agreeable fragrance of fresh tea.

'Oh, Mikhail . . . you look tired! What's the matter, are you ill?'

'No, I'm not ill.'

'Where have you come from?'

'From Headquarters; and tomorrow we're going back to the front.' Her eyes were on him, large and questioning. 'I was bringing in a German officer who'd been captured; but we didn't bring him all the way, exactly . . .' He took his cup in both hands and gulped painfully at the scalding tea. 'I only delivered that letter of yours today. I had a talk with your mother. Anna, I don't know how to thank you for the opportunity to visit your home and meet her!'

'My dear, you'll have lunch with me?'

'Well, my friends are expecting me, but . . .' She never heard his answer: there was a knock on the door and she had to go.

He went to wash and saw himself in a mirror for the first time in several weeks: he was disconcerted by his own appearance — his drawn and haggard face, his prominent cheekbones, his hot and sunken eyes.

A soldier, lightly wounded and able to move about, came and shaved him. Afterwards Anna brought a tray into her room, with lunch for the pair of them, and laid out the plates and the cabbage soup and the chunks of bread herself.

'Anna, if you don't mind, I'd like to give your name and address as the person they should write to . . . look, I'll be writing to you myself, but supposing I was to be killed, then . . .'

She turned her head away and laughed forcibly a moment later. 'What an idea!'

'There's none of my family left, you know: I haven't got anybody at all. Poland is like another world now: we don't know what's happening there. Anna, I want you to think of me occasionally. I'm off, you see — tonight, no question at all about that: and people don't come back from the front, there's too many bullets for that. Look, I'm not hoping or asking for anything, I'm not even frightened! Yesterday I saw the beginnings of mob-rule in Moscow, you see: and I am frightened, but only of being captured and tortured and sent to the concentration camps and broken up, not of just being shot! So, you see, Anna: I've spoken to your mother now, I've seen your home, and as far as I'm concerned everything is quite clear and straightforward.'

He spoke confusedly, lost in his own words.

'Oh, Mikhail, you aren't like the others! I've never met anyone like you before!' And she stroked his cheek. 'I do understand, please believe me: I understand exactly what you're saying!'

He pulled on his greatcoat. 'Well, I must be off.'

'Wait a moment!' She opened her bag and took out a knitted scarf, put it round his neck and shoulders and buttoned his coat up over it. 'There!'

He took her hand: it was cold and quivering. This warmth, this gentleness and femininity was something he had not met since leaving home; and suddenly Lioska's farewell cry across the Moksha was ringing again in his ears. But this was Anna, and she was different: she was part of the new agonising world he lived in now, she reconciled him to its pain, whereas Lioska

called from an immense distance, from the remote unreal beauty of a countryside at peace. Here was Anna, close, so close that he could feel her breath, tender and feminine but carrying also a savour of the hospital, the operating theatre, a death-smell of the war he was in.

She went with him to the outside steps. 'Goodbye, Mikhail; look after yourself, don't ever despair; and write to me!'

He couldn't speak: he just gripped her hand tight, bursting inwardly. She leant forward and kissed him on the forehead.

Nothing was left now of the 316th Infantry Division except the Headquarters. But new recruits poured in every day, and fresh units, as good as new, were formed continually.

The men from Tengushai had gone, the war had eaten them. Those silent, bearded Muscovites lay drowned in the dead forest, blind faces squashed into the snow and the undergrowth; the big men of the Barashovo woods, the Mordvins from Shoksha, the shepherds of Dudnikovo, the Tartars of Atenino, they were all gone, and there would be tears now among their slender, slant-eyed women at home. The Bashkirs, stout fellows with boats and ropes; the carpenters of Vitchki-Deyevo, the fishermen of Krasni-Yar; men whose life had been with wooden bowls and children's toys, men with flat noses and wrinkled foreheads; fine, prosperous farmers from Alexandrovno, poor labourers from Kalamasovo: what had happened to all of them?

What, indeed? Well, they had all gone forward into the outskirts of that broken, battered, and explosive stretch of forest, that much was clear. Perhaps they had all gone through the wood and were there on the other side, where the smoke from shells and bombs lay so thick; possibly, if only that smoke would clear, they would all get up and come back; it must be unpleasant for them to be lost in the white fog; unable to find their way back to the ordinary world.

But perhaps the world had split in two, with a great chasm out there where the forest ended, so that you only had to take one step into the white fog and there you were, gloriously set free from all the bitterness of life. No more exhaustion, no more

pain, no more hunger, no more misery; put your poor feet up and enjoy the warm! No more scrambling over frozen ground with hands and face bleeding from the cruelty of it, no more fire and blood in the eyes: just an ending and a peacefulness, joy and delight, a soft, bird-like flight through the low white clouds, up and away.

At dusk, Menahem reported with Adrian and Zakhar at the headquarters of their new regiment. Here they met Akim Suzayev, who had been their commanding officer in the old monastery; also Sergeant Hritzka Savtchuk and Dimitri Nalogin, who had been Party Secretary at Tengushai.

Suzayev spoke to Menahem. 'So you're here? How has that happened?' He seemed to be trying to remember something: he looked hard and scarchingly at Menahem, his eyes half shut.

'I took a prisoner to Moscow, on orders from Headquarters.'

'Ah yes, that's it. Well, you've been lucky: you've all three been lucky!' But he had eyes only for Menahem, slapped him on the shoulder, winked at him.

A voice roared in the next room, and smoke poured from the open door. 'Who botched up this bloody line? Are they using cobwebs or something? — I can't get a word through: where in hell are the linesmen? Get them out now to find the break and repair it — I'll give them half an hour, otherwise it'll be the front line for the lot!'

Then silence, and Adrian's heavy breathing. Zakhar twisted and fidgeted: Menahem stood at attention before Suzayev, cold and pale.

'Well, what are you waiting for?'

'Orders.'

'Well, get out, then, and wait in the passage. You'll be put into one of the new battalions, it will be the . . .' But he left the sentence unfinished.

They left Headquarters, and then Menahem suddenly saw Frolitch. They ran together.

'Ah, Mikhail, you're still alive! Still alive!'

‘Frolitch, Frolitch!’

Frolitch smiled and impudently winked his eyes: but when he spoke again it was brokenly and in sobs, and his eyes were wet again. ‘Mikhail, Tengushai is finished, the lot of us! All gone! Molkin the miller and his son too, Soboliev, Tchurbassov and Vassili Labzin — you remember him, Mikhail? — Dimitri Zubov, old Kuzma from Barashovo, yes and Kolko, and Yegor Prostavilin, everybody, every one, the whole lot!’

Frolitch himself had been slightly wounded: he had been sent from the field hospital to become Suzayev’s batman, he had horses to look after and fires to stoke, and he waited in the headquarters mess.

Now he undid his tobacco pouch and offered it round.

‘That’s strong tobacco!’ Adrian remarked.

‘Yes, I’ve still got some from home: that’s real Tengushai stuff, that is.’

It was dark, a cold night in late November: silence fell as they rolled cigarettes in the light from the door, their hands moving feverishly and casting great shadows.

Chapter Six

SHORTLY after midnight a fever of noise and activity broke out in and around Regimental Headquarters. Men were shouting, armoured cars were roaring, messengers dashed up and down and to and fro, doors banged everywhere.

An officer sat and cursed into the telephone: 'Hullo Iceberg, hullo Iceberg, are you there, blast you?' He banged the table with his fist, calling down imprecations on the whole world and the sky and the stars: 'Whore's bastard, bloody useless, to hell with you then!' The telephone had been out of action for an hour. 'They're all asleep, those bloody idlers, those tramps, those stupid pissed-up drunks!' And he flung the receiver down and made a gesture of rage and despair.

Then a door was flung open, light streamed into the corridor, and Menahem woke up suddenly. It was freezing hard, and a cold wind blew in from outside.

In the door stood a short man in a long coat, pausing there a moment to listen with a grin to the officer swearing at the telephone. Then they greeted one another.

'So you're here, are you, Sasha, just as I've been bawling myself stupid for the last hour, trying to get you on this telephone! Well, sit down.' And he went to the door and called for Frolitch.

Frolitch came forward from some corner, bent and shabby. 'Yes, there's a bit of rotgut left, sir, just a tiny bit' — he scratched his head vigorously — 'just a drop, I was saving it . . .'

'Right, then fetch it!'

They took half a glass each.

'Well,' the newcomer asked, 'is everything ready?'

'Yes, I've got the orders: but I was just trying to get in touch with you, to ask about one or two details . . .'

'Details? What the hell do you want with details? Aren't orders good enough for you? Look, the Germans are cracking, we've got to shove forward like an avalanche, no stopping; the reserve units will be in action in a day or two, you must be ready!'

The colonel strode about, then stopped at the open door, his back to the captain. 'H'm, I see that your headquarters staff has got a bit inflated. Well, they've had a nice warm now, get them all moving, do it tonight! Look at those men in the corridor, sprawling around with nothing to do! My God, it's as bad as the station at Riazan '

He kicked Menahem: 'Get moving, soldier, or you'll miss your train! What station do you think this is? The Tashkent train's gone! You've missed it, laddie, missed your chance!'

Menahem got up and stood to attention. 'What in hell's name do you think you're doing?' the colonel went on.

Adrian mumbled angrily in his sleep: 'Shut the door, can't you, you stupid bastards!'

Zakhar rose and buckled his belt: his coat was undone and his cap askew.

The captain answered the question put to Menahem, and explained that he had just come from Divisional Headquarters.

'Ah, you're the chap, are you?'

'Yes, we were escorting that German prisoner.'

'I've heard about that. Stout fellows! Well, you'll be off again now, but not to Moscow: there'll be a reserve regiment arriving any moment now, and you'll join them. Got that?'

'At your orders, colonel!' And Menahem moved back towards the dark corridor.

'One moment, soldier: what's your name?'

'Menahem Issakovitch.'

'A Jew?'

'Yes.'

'Do you know German, can you read and write German?'

'Yes, colonel.'

The colonel grabbed him by the hand and hustled him towards the door. 'Then why in hell's name didn't you say so before?'

'You never asked.'

'Good heavens, man, a soldier's supposed to report any special skills and qualifications he has without being told to! It's all in the regulations! See? -- Right: your name is Menahem Isaak, did you say?'

'I didn't realise, sir, that knowing German was the kind of skill or qualification the army would be interested in.'

'Good God, yes; just now, it's more useful than being a first-class fighter-pilot. There's a top-level order about it, very important — all ranks who know German. Right: you're to stay here at Regimental Headquarters — that's an order from me.'

He drew Menahem forward into the light of the headquarters office and stared for some time at his exhausted face, his scruffy uniform, his borrowed cap, his worn-out boots.

'Well, Menahem Issakovitch: sit down!' And he gave him a glass of vodka.

An infantry battalion turned up at headquarters, with a noise outside as of waters swishing and ice breaking up.

Adrian and Zakhar went their way: Menahem went to take his leave of them and make a note of their home addresses. They were tearfully sentimental at parting, and Zakhar took a clasp-knife and gave it to Menahem. 'Take it, Mikhail, to remember me by!' He tried to give him also his fur-lined gloves and his cap. 'I won't need this sort of stuff any more, will I? — nothing at all! I'm going to the front. You take them.'

Menahem was in tears.

'I don't want them, I tell you! I don't want anything at all, only a bit of kindness from cold old Mother Earth. She ought to cool me off a bit, maybe: I've been her man all my life, I've dug into her bony old chest with the plough, I've weeded and sown. And she's the same everywhere, you know: touch her

here, she'll feel it in Riazan, in Siberia, everywhere. Yes, when I go down, the cornfields in Riazan will know all about it: poor old Zakhar Glukhin, the earth will be good to me, and take me in just as if I were a little grain of wheat.'

A flare soared against the horizon, revealing momentarily a shadowy world of snowfields and clouds, with men and trees standing gaunt and bare in a formless and unbounded waste.

There was noise afar off, a roaring storm: the sky, split open by the brilliance of the flare, closed up again like a curtain. Menahem's knees were shaking: he felt precariously attached to this world of snow, liable to be caught up into that dazzling gash in the heavens, snatched out of this world and its darkness and gloom.

Adrian drew his coat together and buttoned it, then stared for a long time at the western horizon. Then, by the momentary light of a searchlight, Menahem saw him stride away suddenly to join a column of marching men. Zakhar followed him, a shadow half-seen in the darkness.

The column marched off into the night; a moment later another column came by and vanished in its turn.

A light shone in Menahem's face. 'What do you think you're doing?' It was Captain Suzayev. 'Oh, it's you. I can't get away from you, can I?'

Menahem made no reply: there was a thin dust of snow falling against his face and apparently not melting there; there was a dryness in his nostrils, the cold wind seemed to be choking him.

A feeling of utter weariness bore him down, a desire to sit back and collapse, to ease the breathless misery in his head, to shut his eyes. With what seemed the last ounce of his energy, he pulled himself forward and tottered weakly after the marching columns. 'Adrian! Zakhar!' he cried, but nobody answered.

The noise grew louder: lights flashed across the snow, evoking a sudden peace-time picture of cut glass on white linen.

Menahem was running now. 'Adrian! Zakhar!'

Armoured cars went by, their rear lights dwindling away to

the west. Surely it would be better to follow them, to go with those silent columns of men and meet one's fate squarely, rather than to squat here miserably in the cold and dark?

It was all happening, quite close at hand: the grim lines of Siberian security troops, the crackle of loudspeakers, the hectoring voice of the Political Commissar. Menahem heard it all, and stopped running: he could not make out the bullying words, but soon he heard a great desolate cry echoing across the snow and through and through his own head.

Yes, I want to live, to stay alive! What they're offering is death, destruction, abolition, extermination; but I want to go on living! And here are the orders: to stay here, nice and comfortable at headquarters.

But can I stay here? Can I accept this separation from Adrian and Zakhar and all my friends from Tengushai, can I cling to my own life, is there any excuse for such conduct?

He stood utterly still for a long moment, his head throbbing. What would Frolitch have done in this situation? What would Adrian and Zakhar have done if they had been told to stay behind at headquarters?

Slowly he plodded back, like a mourner at a funeral.

He found things quiet at headquarters, the rooms empty, the doors open. The officers had gone forward with the men as far as the line of security troops, and only wireless operators and telephonists were left behind.

The night was far advanced: Menahem sat sprawled across a table, worn out and hungry, and slept fitfully until Frolitch called him.

'Come on, Mikhail, come with me.' He followed, swaying sleepily, to a cupboard under the stairs, with a packing-case to sit on and a narrow shelf, where Frolitch had made himself a home.

'You lie down, Mikhail: I'll make some tea. Would you like a drop of brandy?'

Menahem took off his boots and puttees and rolled himself up in his coat. A candle burned beside him.

'It's late: do you want anything to eat?'

'No, I'm not hungry.'

Then footsteps on the stairs, and a telephone ringing in one of the rooms: and soon more noise and tumult in headquarters.

'Good luck to you!'

They emptied their glasses and chewed crusts. Frolitch undid his shirt and displayed the wound in his arm, still bandaged. 'I go to the hospital once a week to have it dressed.'

'Where is the hospital for this division?'

'In Moscow.'

Menahem shut his eyes, suddenly reminded again of Anna. She had kissed him on the forehead: lightly, but he still felt the burn of it.

Frolitch put another greatcoat over him, put out the candle, and tip-toed away, leaving Menahem profoundly asleep under that staircase in Regimental Headquarters.

It was on the 5th of December that the German advance ground to a standstill and their guns fell silent. Their armies had been looking forward in November to their victory parade in Red Square: now, it seemed that the Fuehrer was going to be disappointed. Something had gone very wrong with the German war machine: this torrential flood of Russian infantry, pouring in night and day along a narrow sector of the front, was something they had not allowed for, something they could hold back no more effectively than one can hold back a cloud-burst.

Then, on the 6th, the Russians counter-attacked, bringing their security troops into action suddenly and for the first time. These men — well-clothed, rested, and well-equipped — flung themselves furiously against the German positions, and enemy armoured forces were engaged simultaneously in the Kalin, Solnetchnogorsk and Tula sectors of the front.

Menahem had been appointed as an interpreter, working under a Colonel Petrov. Divisional Headquarters had given very precise instructions as to how prisoners were to be treated, and twice Menahem found himself going to Moscow at night

in a staff car with Petrov. Mikhail the Jew and this short, tough man from Leningrad soon became friends.

During the night of the 6th, Russian patrols brought in a captured German: the first one to be interrogated by Menahem before being sent back to a reception camp.

The German stood in the door, trembling and unsteady: he was unshaven, a white shawl round his head, straw matting tied round his boots, his grey coat belted, his eyes bloodshot.

Colonel Petrov slapped his hands together and laughed. 'Look, a fine soldier of the master-race!'

The men who had captured him and many others crowded around, fingering his straw overshoes, his coat. 'Allemand, kaput!' 'Look at his ugly mug!' 'Cold, Russia, Siberia!' They badgered him with odd words of German and Russian, and laughed among themselves.

The colonel closed the door. 'Right, bring him across, don't let's waste any more time.'

Menahem went to the prisoner and made him take off his shawl, then placed a stool in the middle of the room.

The prisoner removed his gloves and stood to attention, his pale eyes wandering uneasily round the room. A tense, almost audible silence fell.

'Sit down.'

The prisoner sat down.

'Your name?'

'Johann Stimmelmeier, from Munich: I'm a businessman in civil life, serving now in the 78th Division.'

Petrov gave him a cigarette.

'Thank you — thank you very much!'

'No doubt you find the Moscow winter a little hard, don't you, Herr Stimmelmeier from Munich?' Menahem asked, and immediately repeated his question in Russian.

The colonel tapped the prisoner on the shoulder. 'This is nothing: he'll manage all right in Siberia, he'll get used to that, even!'

The prisoner, understanding nothing of Petrov's words, smiled and kept saying 'thank you very much' in German.

‘Are you hungry?’

‘No, thank you, Herr Oberst.’ He was unsure how to address Menahem, who wore no badge of rank.

Menahem drew him into a conversation, asking what he had been given to eat the day before, demanding details of his rations; he asked many trifling questions — what army friends did he have? What were their names? (These were noted down.) Then, what about Munich? What news from there? What family did the prisoner have?

‘A wife and three children.’

‘And how are things for them, in Munich?’

‘Not too good, sir: no butter, no fats, air-raids, but . . .’

‘Is Munich a beautiful city?’

‘Oh, yes, sir! The English Garden, the Isar and the gardens beside it!’

‘How about Warsaw, then? Is that a beautiful city, too?’

The German twitched, but had nothing to say.

Late at night they woke the prisoner and took him forward in an armoured car equipped with a loudspeaker. Thin gunfire crackled distantly in the dark, and light swung and hovered among the clouds as a searchlight turned and faded. A quiet night: one of the first quiet nights Moscow had known for a long time.

‘Outside!’ Menahem ordered harshly.

The German climbed down from the armoured car and stood in the shadows, head buried in his turned-up collar. A technician arranged the wires and the loudspeaker, and then Menahem said: ‘Before we switch on, run over what you’re to say.’

The German began to recite. ‘This is Johann Stimmelmeyer of the 78th Division speaking. I’ve been captured by the Russians, and I’m being treated well. I’m calling my friends — Siegfried Luedke, Friedrich Braun, Ernst Heinzl: come across and surrender! There’s no need to be frightened of the Russians — they treat their prisoners well!’

‘That’ll do for now,’ said Menahem.

When the prisoner's voice roared out into the night from the loudspeaker, the world seemed to be listening in silence. The clouds were dark, the searchlights switched off, there was heaviness and blackness in the air.

A gun fired close by, its smoke curling low, and an artillery duel began: in between the rolls of its thunder, the prisoner could be heard calling 'Siegfried Luedke! Friedrich Braun! Ernst Heinzl! Come across and surrender!'

At dawn they went back to headquarters; Menahem drew up a report on the interrogation of the prisoner and their visit to the front, and telephoned it through to Divisional Headquarters.

Frolitch had a talent for finding liquor and food. He got it from the stores, or fetched it from Moscow, or bartered for it among the men. There was usually a smell of cooking, coming from his hole under the stairs: tinned meat, perhaps, frying over a stove acquired illicitly. He pressed empty tins into service as cups for the hot, sweet tea he always had ready. The headquarters staff would come in and sit on his hard bed and hold these comforting tea-cups, and Frolitch would stand in the door watching them with cautious respectful regard.

'Ah, my lads: there used to be a time when you could sit down to a proper samovar of the Tula sort, and watch it steaming and gleaming at you . . . yes, and a big white loaf on the table, and you'd polish off a dozen or so cups, lovely hot tea with raspberry leaves. . . .'

'What, Frolitch, only twelve glasses?'

'Well, more than that, after a fair-day in winter, perhaps.' He scratched his head and went on: 'There was an old chap in our parts, Mikishkin they called him. Now there you had a real tea-drinker! He would sit at that samovar for hours on end, until he'd emptied it all by himself. Well, one day a friend came to see old Mikishkin, someone from a long way off; so Mikishkin, he got down to it and gave this chap one mug after another, and when they'd had about fifteen mugs each, this other chap was in a muck of a sweat, and he shouted out "That's enough, Mikishkin! no more!" But old Mikishkin

just went on pouring it out; and in our parts, if the tea's poured out you've got to drink it, otherwise it's a big insult for your host. If you don't want any more, you have to put your mug upside down, but he wasn't local and he didn't know anything about that. So they just went on, and when the first samovar was empty, Mikishkin set about a fresh lot. Well, this chap jumped up and yelled "No more, no more, I can't!" But old Mikishkin just answered "You're a flaming liar, you haven't made the sign, you haven't turned your mug . . ." So this visitor, he jumped up and sent it all flying, the samovar, the table, the lot; and the hot charcoal came out, and that started a fire, and we won't forget that fire in Tengushai, not ever! Yes, old Mikishkin, he knew how to drink tea all right, he did!'

There were officers listening, fascinated: Frolitch spoke grandly, with gestures, and sometimes he would wrinkle his brows and grin as if to hint in passing at the mystery and complexity of the world and all its strange creatures.

His affection for Menahem had taken a fatherly and protective turn: he looked after the younger man as in the old days he had looked after his fields and horses: mending his boots, doing his laundry, making him a pair of fur mittens, heating water for him to wash in.

When he went to the hospital to have his wound dressed, he asked for Dr. Anna Samoilovna Korina and gave her Menahem's good wishes in his countryman's burr. 'You see, Doctor,' he explained, 'at our Headquarters there's this chap from Tengushai: well, he really comes from much further off than that. Mikhail, we call him, a dark, narrow chap. Well, yesterday we were having a cup of tea, and I just happened to mention that there was a lady doctor in this hospital, name of Anna Samoilovna; and then he turns his great dark eyes on me, he does, his hands start shaking and trembling and his tea slops out, so help me, it does. So I ask him: Mikhail, I say, what's come over you? Nothing at all, he says; but, he says, just give her my kind regards. That's what he says. So here I am, lady, Frolitch the stableman from Tengushai, discharging that duty, same as directed!'

'What did she say, this lady doctor?' Menahem asked eagerly when he was told about this.

'Steady on, my lad: don't go so fast!' And Frolitch unbuttoned his coat and took a note out from his inside pocket.

Menahem read, his lips trembling, happiness making him gasp.

I've been praying for you, Mikhail. I'm glad you are where you are: I'm sure I'll see you soon, as soon as there's a chance. Anna.

That evening, he made his first sketches of life at the front: his hand moved quickly, his lines were abrupt and fierce. He drew Adrian and Zakhar on the snowy plain, looking upwards: he drew Frolitch kneeling by an oilstove; he drew the German prisoner in his white shawl and overshoes of straw; he drew a street full of snow and dirt, where a swastika lay torn and trampled, with a Red Army man beside it, machine-gun in hand, joy on his noticeably Jewish features.

In the early days of December, while the frost was murderous, the mortars sang, fires broke out, shell splinters screamed like hail among the tree-tops, fell like meteors: the Russians were attacking, their guns roared, and the forest seemed to come to life as tanks, camouflaged with branches, roared forward over the shaking earth. And while the tanks moved forward for the attack, dark shapes were seen uncertainly in the night: cavalry.

The attack began in the region of Kalin and Volkolomosk. Nearby, on this same soil of Mozheisk, the Russians had given Napoleon's army their death-blow at the battle of Borodino. 'Hold fast: Moscow is behind you!' So ran the inscription on the monument to General Kutuzov; and now, in the same village, the Russians were fighting the Germans.

At dawn, the Russian barrage ceased; the earth shook as the tanks and the heavy guns moved forward through the broken front, the cavalry following in the grey mist, a thick cloud at each horse's nostrils, the frost white on their flanks. The

cavalrymen wore white capes across their shoulders, or short white sheepskin coats.

The snow was untrodden, frozen hard: the horses panted heavily across it, their ill-shod hooves marking it with blood. Most of them had come an immense distance.

Snow blanketed the countryside, villages lay sunk in misty horizons. Shadows slid between the trees and bushes, brown shadows, black shadows: here and there a churned-up and hoof-marked stretch of land, dotted with still-steaming horse-manure, showed where the tanks and the cavalry had gone by.

For the Germans, it was cold. They would take furniture from houses, fences, anything they could lay their hands on for firewood, but still they were cold; and when the Russians captured a trench, they would find it full of furs and blankets, collected by the Germans in their desperate efforts to keep warm.

The country around Moscow is astonishingly beautiful in winter: rolling country with little woods and copses, the branches bending under their weight of snow. You see snow-covered haystacks, a disused cottage, a village in its winter sleep, a lonely oak in a field: during the day the sky seems high and clear, and the sun often shines. It must have looked very much the same a hundred and twenty-nine years ago as it did one year ago. And tomorrow, when the war had moved on, more snow would fall and cover everything as it was before, and then the spring rains would come and rinse away the hidden bloodstains. But the sap would bleed from the torn trees for a long time; and at Tengushai there would only be women. It would be the same at Barashovo, at Atenino, at Dudnikovo. A generation would pass, however, and these villages would come to life again: and the forests would grow once more, the running sap stanching the new growth rising green and energetic from the roots.

On one occasion Petrov led Menahem to see Captain Suzayev. Two soldiers were standing there, newly arrived with a tank unit, both of them Jews.

'Listen, Mikhail,' Suzayev said. 'Here are two chaps who want their names changed in their pay-books. They don't want any record of the fact that they're Jews.'

Menahem said nothing; Suzayev smiled contemptuously. 'I see their point,' he said. 'There's been an order that requests of this kind are to be met. But I've told them that we've got a Jew here who thinks otherwise.'

'But why did you send for me? This didn't call for an interpreter, did it?'

Later that evening, Petrov was leaning across a table while Menahem explained it to him. 'You know why they do that? They're afraid of being captured by the Germans; our men give the Jews away at once, and then they're shot.'

'Yes, I know.'

'Well, if I'm going to die, I prefer to die as a Jew!'

Menahem felt no regret at having offered no friendship to those two men, at passing them by in silence without a word.

Nikolai Zhilin, the Political Commissar, visited Headquarters and saw Menahem's drawings there. He took them at once, for an army newspaper. 'I didn't know that you had a real live artist here!' He got in touch with Divisional Headquarters, and sent Frolitch there with the drawings: such things were badly needed, for propaganda.

The Russians dug themselves in and consolidated their newly-captured positions; they worked at the frozen earth with picks and spades and then camouflaged their gun emplacements and their communication trenches with snow.

The Germans were lying low. Occasionally a single Junkers would appear, but without fighter escort and only for a moment.

This was when the Russian reconnaissance patrols came into their own.

The Russian army used several different techniques of reconnaissance. One method involved the careful use of artillery fire, so planned as to provoke counter-fire that would reveal the enemy gun-positions. Another method was to send out skir-

mishing parties to probe the enemy defences. Then there was a third method. A patrol would be robed in white and sent at night, invisible against the snow, to some village behind the German lines, which they could reach if they took a sufficiently devious route. There they would capture some prisoner, who could be made to talk about the enemy order of battle.

With these white-robed patrols there would always be sent a few sappers, who had the difficult and dangerous task of locating the German minefields. The mines lay almost wholly buried in earth or snow, only a thin 'whisker' protruding: if this whisker was touched by a foot, a trigger was released, the detonator was fired, and up went the mine.

This was the background to an episode which had a powerful effect on Menahem. Two soldiers were brought before a court-martial: Lavrov, who came from Omsk, and a Jew from Vitebsk called Abrasha Feigin. They were accused of lying, of a deception which had led to the death of several Russian soldiers. They had been sent to clear a minefield, and early in the morning they had reported this task done; but an hour later, several mines had gone off in the area in question, killing a number of Russian soldiers; plainly, the mines were still in position. Their judges were Colonel Petrov, Captain Suzayev, and Zhilin, the Political Commissar.

The sentence was read out to the men's regiment, paraded for the purpose in front of headquarters; they were both to be shot for treason.

One of them, Lavrov, fell face down to the snow and moaned: 'I'm innocent — we did our duty!'

He clutched at his hair and tore at his clothes; but Feigin the Jew stood silent, his long olive face immobile.

Menahem heard Suzayev whispering to Zhilin: 'Look at that Yid! If you ask me, it was him who led the other one on: that would be just like his sort!'

Menahem felt his blood-pressure rising, his temples throbbing. But among the other men on parade there was whispering: 'It's our chaps who have to pay for that sort of bloody

trick!' 'Yes, those Jews are always up to tricks and dodges. Well, that's one fallen into it up to his ears now!'

There was total silence: a paper rustled faintly in Zhilin's hands.

Then a rifle barked and the sound echoed and re-echoed in the silent world. 'Parade, dismiss!' But where those two men had been standing, there was only a little dirty heap.

That night, Menahem went out with one of the patrols, at his own request. Headquarters had been difficult about it at first: Colonel Petrov had even tried to consult Divisional Headquarters, but he could not get through, and the patrol was due to go out soon. There would be trouble if his interpreter were not to return: where would they find another? He would be blamed for sending a man out on patrol who was much more useful in other work.

Menahem understood the colonel's hesitation, but pressed him hard. 'I have to go, Colonel: please give me permission!'

This was a new kind of situation altogether for Suzayev: he stood by and scowled in silence.

The village of Navilkovo was in German hands: to get there, you had to go first across a stretch of undulating open country with just a few scattered trees and bushes in the snow, then through a dark patch of forest, and there, beyond a wooded hill, lay Navilkovo among its fields.

The orders were simply to make this village too hot for the Germans. They had set up mortar batteries there, which covered the forest and held the Russians back: several attacks had been repulsed with heavy losses. The fields in front of the village were mined: this was where those two men had been sent to clear the mines, and shot afterwards for not doing it.

Gathered in several groups in front of headquarters, the men felt a fine powdery snow driving upon them until their white robes shone silver. They were well rested and warmly dressed: snow crunched underfoot, magazines rattled, grenades clanked together, and the heavy machine-guns stood ready, mounted on sledges and camouflaged.

There were five men in the patrol. They moved off cautiously, taking cover where possible among the bushes, slipping along silently, white butterflies in a world of snow.

It was a quiet night: only occasionally a shell burst or a rattle of machine-gun fire sounded among the frozen bushes, and then the men would drop down to the snow. Menahem went third in line, following a burly Siberian, grenades at his belt and a sub-machine-gun at his chest; he kept turning to make sure that it was a man and not a ghost following him, so very silent were the movements of the man behind.

They approached the forest, and then all at once came a long burst of machine-gun fire. That would be the Germans changing the guard, or possibly one of their advanced posts reporting its presence: the noise seemed to come from a clearing in the forest.

Menahem was among men experienced in this patrol-work, able to recognise instantly what kind of gun was firing and where the noise was coming from; they had an intimate knowledge of every sort of gun and shell and flare and searchlight used by the Germans.

'We'll be hearing that gun again, in just two hours. You make a note of the time now!' said the shadowy soldier behind Menahem. A few stars twinkled faintly in the frosty sky.

Menahem began to enjoy himself. His short fur jacket kept him warm, and he moved easily and lightly on his snow-shoes; the long white robe kept the snow off him, though it still blew in his face.

The Siberian adjusted the grenades at his belt. 'This is your first time out, isn't it? I can tell that by the way your grenades rattle — you want to do them up tight, like this.'

A moment later he asked: 'Where are you from?'

'Poland.'

'Ah, my father served at Warsaw once, long ago, in the Tsar's time, in the fortress there.'

Menahem grinned at him in the dark. 'Yes, and my father was one of those who were trying to kick the Tsar out! He was under arrest in that fortress for quite a while.'

'Right, then when we get back we'll have a drink in honour of them both. My father's still doing fine: how's yours?'

Menahem had no answer to that: he just stared at the dark forest, the few stars in the flat sky.

A few days earlier there had been fighting in the forest just here: trees had been shot down and bits of them lay everywhere, piled up, smashed to splinters, tangled up so thoroughly as to make the going very difficult. The men kept falling into shell-holes and tripping over exposed roots, with a continual crackling from twigs and ice and branches underfoot.

'Here's the edge of the wood: over there, now, that's the fields round Navilkovo.'

'There should be a German post just about here.'

And as they spoke a machine-gun rattled again: exactly two hours had passed. But now they were close by, they could see the red flicker at the gun-barrel.

'On the dot, just two hours!'

'Well, they'll be quiet now for another two hours.'

The German position was on rising ground, looking towards the forest: they had dug themselves well in for warmth and safety.

Menahem and one other stayed behind, and the other three went round to the south, along the edge of the forest, so as to approach the post from behind.

The plan was that these three should capture the post and stay there until the other two joined them, summoned by a low short whistle. The night would be long, and there would still be time then to get into the village itself and put a few grenades through German windows before getting back to their own lines.

In the post, two German soldiers were whispering: one of them was smoking, and the Russians were now close enough to smell the smoke.

They fell, Russian daggers in their backs; the helmet of one of them flew off and crashed into the wooden wall of the dug-out as he went down.

Sooner than Menahem and the other had expected, they heard the whistle and went forward into the dug-out: there

was something slippery underfoot. Faint starlight shone on their faces as they lifted and groped at the bodies: Menahem found a wallet in a pocket.

‘Army documents, and a passport, I think.’

The man in charge took the papers and told them to move on. ‘Careful, lads! This field is mined, remember!’

They split again into two groups, so as to approach the village from both ends simultaneously: Navilkovo consisted of one long street running east and west. Menahem and his silent companion were to go round to the west end and use their guns and grenades at the first hut on the right, which was occupied by German officers: and then, as soon as the Germans had turned out after them, the other three would move in from the east and toss their grenades into a big courtyard where dozens of lorries were parked.

There was just half an hour to go before the relief would go out to the men dead in the dug-out; their path went from the western end of the village.

Menahem went in front. Despite the frost and the snow stinging his eyes he undid his coat and threw back his white hood: he was on fire, there was steam at his lips and nostrils. He took off his fur gloves and grasped the cold steel of his gun, while his companion followed silently in his footprints.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Volodya.’

‘Have you got any family?’

‘Wife and three children.’

‘Well, Volodya,’ Menahem whispered, ‘you’re fighting for the living, and I’m fighting for the dead. You’ve got a wife, children, a country of your own; I’ve got nobody and nothing, I’m quite alone!’

A dark shadow slid between the bushes, and they crouched low for a moment. ‘A hare, I think,’ Volodya said.

When you are wearing snow-shoes the snow doesn’t crunch noisily as it does under ordinary boots; you step softly and lightly, with only a faint squeak — sleigh-bells in the distance? — as the hard crust cracks under your weight.

'You live a long way off?'

'I came from Poland,' Menahem answered.

'All wars start in Poland. It's an unlucky country, they're unlucky people. Are you a Pole, then?'

'I'm a Polish Jew.'

'What? A Jew?'

'Yes — what's the matter, Volodya?'

But the Russian was silent; and now they were at the western end of the village, looking down the long wide street. A door opened, and someone ran over to another building.

They crouched behind a fence: a dog started barking close by, and two armed Germans were marching down the street, on their way no doubt to relieve their dead friends in the dug-out. Menahem fingered his gun; one pull on the trigger, a good squirt . . . no, wait, let them come nearer, and then, at three paces . . .

Volodya looked at the luminous dial of his watch. 'That can't be the relief for the dug-out! They're too early.'

'Germans are punctual: you won't find them going out twenty minutes early, just to freeze in the open.'

Then the two Germans stopped, just by the last hut, and lit their pipes in the shelter of the wall: they were probably not allowed to smoke openly in the street, but here, under the eaves of the last hut, they felt safe enough.

Menahem chose his moment, and fired: the two Germans fell backwards as though they had been twitched on a string. Volodya leapt to the window of the hut, smashed it, and flung a grenade inside.

'Volodya! Who's that yelling? Those two, or is it people in the hut?'

There was a deafening explosion and a distant patter of gunfire. Menahem tore two grenades from his belt and sent them flying: the snow-covered thatch blazed up: a German appeared, bare-headed and partly dressed, in the door, firing a revolver into the night: his polished boots gleamed.

Volodya bent down and rolled something forward: and then it was as though the whole night sky shattered over Menahem's

head like glass, and he felt himself dragged along by his arm, his coat, anyhow and in any direction, with a terrible roaring of pursuit behind him.

He tried to pull off his white robe, but Volodya stopped him.

'They'd pick us out easy, in dark clothes,' he panted as they went.

The night was a mass of moving shapes and shadows, slowing and calming down as they moved on among the frosted bushes and along the narrow trodden path. They reached the edge of the forest and heard the village still in tumult, its west end in flames, its east end a din of firing.

It had all worked out perfectly. As soon as the hue and cry started after Menahem and Volodya, the other three had opened fire at the other end of the village and set the lorries ablaze. And so, at dawn, they reported back to headquarters.

Frolitch ran to greet Menahem, tears in his eyes. 'Ah, Mikhail, my Misha!' He pulled off his white robe and his jacket, and carefully undid his grenade-belt. 'Now lie down, Mikhail, have a good rest!'

He made Menahem sit down on his own bed, took off his snow-shoes, laid his gun aside. 'Now I'll get my old samovar going: tea in a minute!'

Menahem watched him: he felt his whole body shattered by fatigue, his eyes bloodshot and heavy. He tried to smile at Frolitch, but his lips were swollen and he could only produce a grimace; his mouth was dry, and his gorge rose when he tried to swallow.

'Did they all come back?'

'Yes, I think so.'

Steam rose from the tinpot samovar.

Menahem tried to compose his mind, but it went whirling and racing: he saw the market-place at home in Poland, then Anna's home, then himself running through the Warsaw streets, then his father wearing the yellow star of David: that half-dressed German fired into the frosty night and those German corpses, stabbed in their own dug-out, slithered wetly in his mind; the muzzle of his gun glowed red-hot, and Anna

came back, and the streets of Moscow, and the swastika flag, trampled and torn there in the snow.

‘Come on, Mikhail; pull yourself together and have a nice drink!’

His fingers were shaking, and the mug slipped in his hand. Fever? Why did his arm feel so heavy? He could not sit up, he had to lean against something, and his teeth chattered.

Colonel Petrov and Captain Suzayev were standing in the door. ‘Hey, Frolitch: what are they talking about? Frolitch! . . .’

Hot tea was held to his lips; its warmth spread through his body, his knees stopped shaking, and he felt his legs free at last from the leathery stiffness that had been round them; he could stretch, his throat felt comfortable again.

At midday the door squeaked again. Frolitch? No. Someone leant over, unbuttoned his tunic, opened his shirt: light fingers moved over his face, soothingly.

‘It’s nothing,’ a rather unsteady voice said. ‘Nothing, Mikhail — just a little splinter, only a surface wound, just by your arm!’

He opened his eyes and saw dried blood on his shirt.

‘Take it easy, Mikhail, you’re worn out. Haven’t you recognised me?’

‘Anna,’ he whispered, and tried to get up.

She took his face in her hands. ‘Take it easy, I said! Keep still: you won’t even have to go to hospital, we’ll get it dressed at once. Everything’s going to be all right!’

She opened her bag, and a smell of chloroform came out. Frolitch helped her to drag Menahem into a sitting position.

The splinter was very near the surface, and she soon had it out; but then the bleeding really started. She dressed the wound, while he lay wide-eyed and still, and afterwards she sat on the edge of the bed and wiped his face: it was scratched all over.

‘That’s from all those brambles and branches and ice and everything.’

He looked at her high clear forehead, her long lashes; a black curl hung loose under her fur cap, and there was an unspoken

grief in her eyes. Doctor and patient, they had a lot in common: the same eyes, the same tragic expression, the same darkness of Jewish blood.

'Brother and sister, that's what you look like, you two!' said Frolitch.

'Well,' she smiled, 'blood-relations, perhaps.'

Zhilin the Political Commissar came in, shaking the snow off his coat and boots.

'Ah, Anna Samoilovna, good to see you! And how's the patient?' And without waiting for an answer, he opened a bag and took out several papers and magazines.

'Here are your drawings, Mikhail: they've been put into several of these army papers.'

Menahem looked and saw a big heading: 'From a soldier's sketch-book.'

'And they've made a poster out of that drawing of yours, of a swastika flag trampled down by a Red Army man with his gun. It's all over Moscow.'

Anna turned over the pages: here was the German prisoner, there was Frolitch making tea.

'Frolitch,' roared the commissar. 'Come here and take a look at yourself!'

Frolitch looked in amazement at his portrait. 'Well, I'll be blowed! Me to the life, the suit and image!'

There was nowhere at headquarters where Menahem could rest until his light wound healed, so they took him to hospital in an ambulance. Anna went with him, he was warmly dressed, and he found the journey tolerable. His temperature had gone down — it had only been exhaustion, after all — and he could move his arm now without pain. In the ambulance there were several other casualties, including one badly wounded man who lay under his greatcoat and groaned faintly.

Through the streets and suburbs they went, but Menahem could only see bare trees, the top of a tower, grey walls, and then once again great stretches of bare snow.

'Anna!'

She leant towards him.

'I've fallen in love with all that openness and snow, and all the uncertainty and danger too!'

He took her hand: it felt very warm.

'When we were at Navilkovo, I was thinking of you. When it was nearly over, I had a kind of vision of you and also of my own old home . . . Anna, why has that man stopped groaning? Is he dead?'

The ambulance stopped with a jerk: orderlies opened the door, Anna jumped down, and within a few moments Menahem was in a comfortable clean white bed.

On that same day, feverish preparations for a night attack began. A battalion was detailed to occupy Navilkovo as a test or probe of the German defences: it was to be a full-scale battle, arranged for intelligence purposes.

Administrative and staff officers appeared at Headquarters and looked into the regiment's organisation and equipment. Strange officers swarmed everywhere, installing themselves in all the rooms and issuing orders to various units in the vicinity: there were endless conferences between Suzayev and Zhilin and these energetic fellows from the staff: the telephone rang continually with messages from Divisional Headquarters.

At last everything was ready. Units on either side were to support the attack with a heavy and continual artillery barrage; the village of Navilkovo was to be captured, come what might.

The day came, and each man got a warming tot of vodka. New Year's presents were coming in for them, from all over the country — woollen gloves, knitted scarves, tobacco pouches embroidered with initials — and many of the men spent the afternoon writing letters home. They knew that something big was in the wind: this was obvious from the repeated inspections that were made. Zhilin the Political Commissar moved among the men, with a friendly joke for everybody.

The attack was to be led by Lieutenant-Colonel Tcherkass; it was his battalion that would be attacking.

At twenty to eight in the evening, a horse-drawn sleigh

carried General Pliskin, Captain Suzayev, and Zhilin forward from Regimental Headquarters, and less than half an hour later they arrived at the front-line command post. Tcherkass came running up to meet them, and as they saw his tall figure the barrage began.

‘Good lads! On the dot!’ And he stared happily at his watch as though he had never seen it before.

The thunder of the guns sounded on both sides, north and south, and by the light that flashed incessantly from the emplacements one could see the shells on their way, towards Navilkovo and the dark forests and snowfields beyond, where men crouched clinging to hope with death all round them.

‘Well, Tcherkass, this is your big moment!’

The General held out both hands and Tcherkass came to attention and took them: the feelings of the moment were in hands and eyes, not in words, as these two Jews stood face to face in the night of violence — Pliskin the Jewish engineer from Homel, Tcherkass the Jew from Leningrad.

The Political Commissar approached, and the officers parted their hands and waved curtly.

‘You’ve got two accounts to settle with them, Tcherkass: give it to them twice over!’ So said the General, meaningfully, as Tcherkass withdrew and disappeared into the night.

The barrage became heavier, and suddenly a red flare soared up into the night.

‘Good timing, again!’ the General observed.

Now the Germans were returning the fire: there was a huge explosion nearby, and dirty earth flew and fell over the snow.

There was about two hundred yards between the front-line Russian trenches and the edge of the forest, and this strip of ground was receiving the full weight of the German counter-barrage. But when that red flare appeared, Tcherkass’s men leapt from their trenches and sprinted forward.

Sergeants with machine-guns dashed along the trenches, yelling, ‘Come on! Get up! Get out of it!’

One soldier lay in the trench still, doubled up and paralysed with fear.

'Get moving, you bastard!'

A young officer, hardly more than a boy, brought the muzzle of his machine-gun down to this soldier. 'Too shit-scared, are you? Right!' And there was a bang and a flash and a moment's glimpse of a smashed and crumpled head; and then the other soldiers in the trench were up and away.

'Down! Take cover!'

Snow flew and spattered, like a whirl of pigeons disturbed. Here were the trees, the forest: here were the bushes and a ditch. A line of men jumped up and across the bushes: one of them fell on his back.

'Give me a hand, you boys: help me up, it's nothing, I caught my foot in a bramble. That's what happened to me!' But he twisted and turned and couldn't get up for the dreadful weight on his legs. Someone must have fallen on top of him! 'Get off, can't you, pull your bloody legs away, I can't get up. They're all gone on, I can't stop here; how can I find my company again? I'll be lost for ever in this snow!'

Someone ran by, yelling: the fallen man could hear and understand everything perfectly, but now he found it hard to speak; the weight was on his chest now. If only he could shove it aside, he'd be all right; he would dash over to the woods, and there he would feel at home, just as if he were back in Siberia, beside the Irtysh, in his own woods. Won't some kind friend help me up? — I seem to have some difficulty in standing, so, please? . . .

Silence fell around him: a silence not likely to come to an end or suffer any disturbance from anybody or anything. Mines could go off, tanks could rattle and clatter, commanding officers could roar and threaten, guns could be fired into the brains of a low contemptible coward to teach him courage and obedience: but this silence would hold.

Now, right across that open space and up to the edge of the forest, there were countless grey heaps of the fallen: they covered the dusky snow.

A very few men got as far as Navilkovo: Tcherkass was among them, and he dashed ahead, gun in hand, howling, 'Come on! Forward!'

The village was half burnt, its chimneys still standing tall and black. From beside what remained of a house, a soldier fired a green flare, to show that Tcherkass had reached his objective.

They interrogated a German prisoner, and found that the minefield before Navilkovo had in fact been very thoroughly cleared by the two men executed for treason. The Germans had been ordered not to interfere with them; then, as soon as they had gone back to the Russian lines, the same area was mined again, by the Germans. And so an entire Russian unit had been blown to pieces.

Lavrov and Feigin had not been traitors at all: they had been punished unjustly and too quickly, the haste and urgency being on Captain Suzayev's part. He had gone straight to Divisional Headquarters and asked to see General Pliskin; and the General well remembered his coming, his demand that the sentence should be confirmed, his narrow eyes, his truculent manner.

'Two soldiers, Nikolai Lavrov and Abrasha Feigin: and obviously one of them persuaded the other to this treachery. It's easy to see which of them started the idea . . . I wonder what you think, General?'

'What does it matter?' The General had answered irritably: and he had confirmed the sentence, though reluctantly. He was aware that he ought to defer the sentence, and not sign until he had looked into the matter: the name 'Feigin' gave him pause. But here, between himself and this Feigin, stood Captain Suzayev, a Russian and no Jew, and a member of the N.K.V.D. as well; Suzayev felt sure that the General would not sign, and he stood there slant-eyed and sure of himself, affecting great politeness. To hell with him and his certainties! And the General had signed with a swift contemptuous slash of his red pencil.

So now General Pliskin slammed the door and strode around his room unhappily. He stopped before the big wall map, with its little flags, black and red, to mark the lines. How close they

were to the enemy! His eyes dimmed, his fingers twitched among those little flags: his long Jewish features were pale and drawn, his brows were heavy: a man bent and worn out.

He felt trapped, caught in a million ever-tightening threads. Was he not a free agent after all? Why couldn't he have pushed that paper back at Suzayev and said 'Not so fast, we'll look into that later'? Perhaps he would have done this, if there hadn't been the assurance in those slanting narrow eyes, that implication about which man had influenced the other. He had felt a need to assert himself, to show his indifference and impartiality; he had signed the paper precisely because Suzayev had been so very sure that he would hesitate. He had not even read the document carefully or asked for details: it was as if the whole thing had been a tedious detail of no concern to him, the most unimportant of trifles.

Chapter Seven

AFTER three days they let Menahem out of hospital, and back he came in the evening, by lorry: a nasty muggy cold December night. He brought back with him a folder of drawings he had made in hospital, and some paper and pencils as well.

At headquarters, he found the corridor packed with idle soldiers, puffing away at their pipes.

In Frolitch's little hide-out it was dark: Menahem slipped inside and attended to the lamp, which was low. 'Bad organisation there: you're slipping, Frolitch!' The light blossomed up, throwing his shadow hugely across walls and ceiling.

A hoarse jabbering came through the wall from the next room. It was cold in there: the stoves must have gone out. Menahem lay down under his coat, but couldn't sleep: the flicker of the lamp and the sway of its light on the ceiling fascinated him.

Next door, a great racket and roaring, with that hoarse voice bellowing its amusement: they'll have the walls down soon, Menahem thought, noting with gloom that among all their hooting and howling of laughter there was another voice — shaky, defensive, and alone. He turned his face to the wall.

Where had Frolitch got to? What was this tension and savagery in the air, worrying at his head and tightening his throat? Why was he in pain? It was nothing to do with his wound, anyway — a scratch, almost healed now.

A telephonist called, and someone shouted into the instrument. Then there was a burst of barrack-room song: 'If God had never made Himself, Then who should we have to curse?'

Feet stamping, the walls shaking: he got up, flung his coat across him and emerged from the cupboard.

Blazing light in the big room, and a lot of men crowding round a German prisoner, oddly dressed in a white shawl with coloured fringes, a sheepskin jerkin, straw overshoes. Beside him stood a scruffy great Russian, tall and tousle-headed and bushy-browed: that would be the hoarse one, Menahem thought.

'Well, my lucky headquarters heroes, have a look at our dear friend the German. We've brought him in, he's all yours!' The tall fellow cackled harshly and acted clownishly as he spoke, waving his hand at the prisoner and bowing.

The German bowed and smiled in all directions, his fringes swinging: the Russians laughed, and Menahem with them.

'Come on, Fritz, let's have a German song, your national anthem; give us a good tough marching song, eh! — we're all soft, you know, here in headquarters!'

The soldiers edged away as the tall one grabbed the German by the arm. He had understood the Russian words, but he only shook and nodded his head ambiguously.

'Come on, blast you, get singing! — one, two, three — oom, pah, pah!'

Then, suddenly, the German's round beaky face was shadowed with emotion. He stood up straight as a ramrod, his arms stiff at his sides, then goose-stepped in proper parade-ground style (but clumsily, because of his straw overshoes) right across to the wall, and there he did a smart about-turn.

'Bravo, Fritz!' they yelled. 'What a performance! Now give us a Nazi march — come on!'

So he did; and the fighting men of Russia doubled up with laughter as if they had the bellyache: they slapped their boots and each other most boisterously, as the prisoner intoned the first line of the Horst Wessel Song.

Someone tugged Menahem's sleeve. 'Come in, man: don't lurk in the doorway like that!' But as he stepped smiling into the room, Captain Suzayev came in also, behind him, and spoke accusingly to him: 'What the devil's going on here?'

'I've only just come in: I heard the noise, so I got up to see what it was.'

'You've no business to be carrying on like that: it's bad for discipline.'

Menahem said nothing, but pulled his coat up and went out, turning as he went to see Suzayev glaring after him: he never looked at the other men like that, but only at him. He came back and faced the captain squarely.

'I should have answered that: you're blaming me for something I didn't do.'

'No? Well, you weren't doing anything about this breach of discipline; and I shouldn't be surprised if it was you who started it.'

Menahem stood to attention, saluted woodenly, and walked away without speaking again; and in his little cupboard he found Frolitch.

'Ah, my old friend!' — with a cheerful slap on the shoulder.

'Steady on, it still hurts!' Frolitch had a fine boozy smell about him. 'What have you been drinking?'

'Just a little drop, and I saved some for when you came back — here you are . . . Old Frolitch always tells the truth, you know, old Frolitch always keeps his promises . . .' And he groped about under the bed and in a box and all around the room and finally found the bottle in his trousers pocket.

'You're like the man who got on his horse and rode all round the village looking for his horse, you are!' Menahem had not seen Frolitch as well-oiled as this before. 'Is it a holiday or something, Frolitch?'

'No, Mikhail, it's better than any bloody holiday, this is. They've sent a load of booze, a consignment of nice spirits, and it's turned up, for us! Eh? Nice and warming, just the job in this frost. Well, Mikhail, I ask you! Who could fight a war like this, against these Germans, if it wasn't for lovely lovely vodka? Eh? We've got to have gunpowder and that; and we've got to have vodka too, just the same.'

He sloshed out some of the stuff into a jam-tin, so that it slopped over. 'All right, Frolitch, that's enough!' And

Menahem drank the whole tin off, and choked. 'God, that's pure spirit!'

'Yes, that'll do you a bit of good, that'll put beef into you!' said Frolitch. His shaggy head dropped as he spoke. 'Mikhail, are you listening? There used to be an old chap at Tengushai, Stiopa Zhurkin they called him: an old misery he was, sneezing and coughing and spitting and moaning all over the place as if he was at death's door. Well, every evening an old widow there, Pelagia Zakharovna, she used to call him to come across and help her saw wood for the next day. He used to hold one end of the saw, just to keep it straight, while she did the work, and when they'd done, she used to give him a bowl of cabbage soup for his trouble. Well, one day the village got together and worked it out that it was a bit miserable for him to go to her house every evening for this job, and then have to go home all by himself in the cold. Better marry them off! So they hotted up a bath for him, and cut his hair, and they gave him a bottle of pure spirit, like that one, and off we all went to old Pelagia and put it to her like this: Pelagia, we said, it's not right for you to call old Stiopa across every evening to hold the saw for you. Here he is, in a nice new shirt: we'll be responsible for him, you just let him stay here with you! Then the old boy had a glass of this spirit, and would you believe it, he sailed out and grabbed the old girl and started dancing with her — oh, they danced well and truly, they did! and Mikhail, God help me if it isn't true, he's still alive now! — but now he's the one who needs somebody to hold the other end of the saw. Poor Pelagia, she died six months later, worn out, God rest her. Shows what a glass of pure spirit can do for you! Yes, and there was another old chap at Tengushai, the man in the post office: I'll tell you about him, he . . .'

But Frolitch could not hold his head up any longer: he fell face down across the bed and started snoring terribly.

After midnight, Menahem heard a tank roar by: one of the heavy new K.V. type. He could not sleep for the headache and the bitter taste in his mouth: that would be Frolitch's pure

spirit. The little room seemed unsteady: would that be the tanks, or perhaps the flickering and smoking of the lamp?

Frolitch kept twisting and turning in his sleep, muttering and cursing, calling on God's mother and all the saints. 'What do I want you lot for? Can't you give me any peace?' Then later on he whispered in a deeply sentimental voice: 'Ah, Yagorke, my cherry, my darling!' Who could that be, Menahem wondered, looking with great affection on this hairy and unimportant old countryman. He leant across and straightened out Frolitch's fur cap, which had fallen aside as he knelt there in the cold night, chest across the bed.

'Frolitch! Get up, Frolitch!'

Frolitch shook his head and murmured: 'Steady now, Yagorke, easy; don't kick me like that, my love. On with your reins, now, and there'll be lovely oats for you, lovely clean oats for you, Yagorke, my darling!'

Then he did sleep, though restlessly, and dreamt about Anna. He was talking to her, and she seemed more subdued than usual, silent and sad. He had only seen her twice at the hospital, and each time she had been tired and overwrought: when they parted she clung to his hand — Mikhail, Mikhail! — and kissed him coolly on the forehead. The second time she had kissed his burning forehead more urgently, with a whisper: 'You're going back to the fire, and I'm going back to the blood.' The last time he had seen her — white-gowned and rubber-gloved, just out of the operating theatre — her face had seemed half tender and half grim: her forehead had twitched slightly, her pale face shaking.

Her room in the hospital was decorated with his drawings: she had hung them over her white bed, and he had also seen cuttings of his work in the magazines, arranged on the table with her paper-work.

Were those really K.V. tanks? If so, that probably meant that a major attack on the Germans must be in preparation.

He got up, staggering a little: the little window was snowed and frosted over, but he could see that it was still pitch dark.

He buckled his belt, buttoned his tunic, put on his coat: out in the passage the soldiers were lying in heaps, one great tangled shadow along the floor. A bright light was burning in the room where he had seen the prisoner: he was asleep now against the wall, guarded by two armed Russians.

Outside, the country lay under a grey mist.

'Who's there?'

Menahem found himself face to face with a roving sentry.

'Friend.'

'Who is it?'

'Mikhail, from headquarters.'

The sentry hid behind a corner of the building. 'You got any tobacco? I'll be relieved in a minute, and I haven't got any left.' Menahem offered his pouch.

'What's that noise?'

'Tanks: it's been going on all night. There's preparations going on.'

'Yes: I counted twenty-five dive-bombers too.'

A thin pencil of light rose above the dark forest, tried to pierce the thick grey clouds, and sank again.

'What's that noise like thunder?'

'That'll be artillery fire, a long way off. There's lots of different noises: that sounds like a 45: and listen, there's a 76 returning the fire! God, what it must be like in the trenches now. On the whole, I'd prefer to be tucked up on a warm stove with some nice keen girl, I would!'

Frolitch was up and about by now, busy cleaning and filling lamps in the corridor. He used salt to keep the flame down and prevent an explosion: there was no paraffin, they had to use petrol for the lamps. Then he set about stoking up the fires.

Regimental Headquarters was on the move, to a village near Navilkovo. The German front had broken and they had retreated in some disorder, abandoning many positions: on the sixteenth of December the Red Army liberated the cities of Kalinin and Yeletz.

In the forests to the north-west of Moscow, German soldiers wandered about without food or shelter, half-frozen: when they came to a village in the forest, they found the houses burnt or pulled down and abandoned, the villagers having taken to caves and dug-outs deep in the forest and living there on meagre hoards of food. These forests were full of partisan groups, made up for the most part of people who came originally from the east of Moscow, from the Urals or along the Volga, from parts of Russia never occupied by the Germans; and there were a fair number of Jews. They all hoped to break through the front line: the Russians in order to get home, the Jews to find safety. All these partisan units were controlled from a centre in Moscow, which had at its disposal hundreds of small light open aircraft. These flew at tree-top height and kept the partisans supplied.

In the attack made by the 316th Infantry Division at the time of the Moscow fighting, these partisans played a decisive part, sabotaging railways, derailing trains, blowing up headquarters and stores, attacking small or isolated units, ambushing convoys of lorries, and in general creating confusion and uncertainty in the German rear: they also saw to the liquidation of collaborators and the burning of their houses.

In their advance towards Moscow, therefore, the Germans suffered the whole impact of the 'scorched earth' policy: in the towns they occupied, they found no food, no buildings in workable condition, no stores of petrol or oil or coal. The country was like a desert, without even roads suitable for their motorised columns, their huge convoys of lorries and armoured cars: and when the autumn rains came, they soaked what roads there were and the open countryside into a uniform, impassable quagmire, a vast stretch of boggy forest and scrub protecting Moscow on the north and west sides. The Germans were totally dependent on road transport for everything needed by the millions of men they had in the field; and these supplies had to be brought a long way, from Prussia, Silesia, Poland by way of Byelo-Russia. And so they came to derelict and deserted towns and found no warm quarters for their officers and head-

quarters and civil administration, no public utilities of any kind, no communications, no transport, no open shops. It was as if there had never been life in those parts at all.

Here and there, by cajolery and sweeping promises, the Germans contrived to get a market functioning: hard cakes of corn and bran, heaps of threadbare second-hand clothing would be offered for sale by the peasantry, and German officers would swagger round the pitiful stalls, riding-crop in hand, jeering and taking photographs. Look what life has been reduced to in the Workers' Paradise!

On they rolled despite difficulties, by day and night, the endless supply convoys, loaded with arms and ammunition and warm clothing and food and medical supplies: grain had to be brought up in bulk, as there were not even potatoes to be had locally in the Moscow region. To keep the power stations working when there was no coal nearer than Silesia, the Germans chivvied the population out to cut wood; and they sent foraging and requisitioning parties around every village to search out grain from the collective farms and the State reserve silos. But these parties found nothing — a mere scrape, perhaps, of last year's grain, rotten and tainted. Here, in what had been known as the granary of the world, the German soldier found himself without a crust: all he had was a huge empty world of hunger and cold and mortal suffering, a strange land of swamps and forests, paths overgrown and roads collapsed, and a people who stared at him with despair and hatred in their eyes.

Within three days, dug-outs were made at an isolated farm in a forest clearing near Navilkovo: these would form the new regimental headquarters. Frolitch was the great expert at building dug-outs: a great square pit would be dug first and lined with planks, then a roof would be put across and well covered with earth, and afterwards work could start on the fittings inside. In a very short time, eight dug-outs of this kind had been made; steps led down to them, there were floors and stoves, and it was cosy inside, with just a little light from a window near the entry. Finally the dug-outs were carefully

camouflaged with pinewood and moss. By the third day there were telephones, and a proper path so that lorries could drive up: and nearby a landing-strip was being prepared, from which light-communications aircraft could operate.

The old headquarters was taken over by the divisional medical unit. During the difficult days of November the medical staff had been brought from Metishtchi to Butirki and then to Moscow, to the city hospital in Kaluga Street. Now, enlarged and re-equipped, they were once again close to the fighting units.

German prisoners were brought in daily, and they were kept waiting for interrogation outside the dug-out used by Petrov and Menahem: they lay and rested among the branches and undergrowth around headquarters, until late on the day of capture they were taken under guard to the reception camp on the eastern side of Moscow. Staff officers, and men suspected of murder and looting and other crimes against the civil population, were sent separately under stronger escort.

Menahem would interrogate them, filling long forms with the answers they gave, and sometimes becoming engaged in long conversations with them: meanwhile Colonel Petrov lay on his bed and apparently dozed, but from time to time opened a sharply interested eye.

When they came in, the Germans were broken men: weary, abject, no fight left in them. Menahem's first reaction to each of them was one of disgust: sometimes this turned to pity after a time, pity not for the Nazi warrior but just for the man. He saw them weeping, kneeling, stammering with fear; they might have fingers, hands, feet, ears, face, all crumbling with frost-bite; one of them threw a photograph onto the table, three happy children — 'My children, Heir Oberst!' — and stood there hopelessly, a dismal figure in rags, his feet wrapped up in sacking secured with telephone wire, bandaged hands on his knees, his eyes bloodshot, a whipped-dog look in his eyes.

'Ah, take it away!' Menahem was angry, banged the table

with his fist and shoved the German's papers and photograph from him. 'Fetch the next one!'

The guards brought the next prisoner in; Menahem stared at him fascinated for a time, then started drawing, feeling rapidly with his pencil for those bony features, that haggard expression. The German was perhaps forty: a short thick fellow, with deep-set eyes and a pock-marked nose. Petrov stood behind and watched as Menahem's drawing took shape, laughing. 'Keep still, there, blast you!'

The German stood there bewildered and scared, his eyes twitching, his lip quivering.

A little shading, a few final strokes, and the drawing was finished.

'Wonderful: as like as two peas in a pod!' Petrov said.

'Look here, you!' Menahem asked. 'Are you familiar with the military theories of Clausewitz?'

'No, Herr Oberst!'

'Or Schlieffen?'

'Well, sir, perhaps . . . I think I've heard of him. . . .'

'Right.' And at the foot of his drawing Menahem wrote in big Russian letters the title: A Disciple of Schlieffen.

'You take the picture, Petrov.'

The colonel laughed uproariously, collapsing onto the bed and holding his belly.

'A disciple, eh? 'That's a good one, he's just the type! . . . Oh, Menahem, you draw like an angel; we must get you to art school, once we've got this war over.'

That very minor wound of his healed quickly, and Menahem felt in good form: the palpitations at his heart, the throbbing at his temples troubled him less and less. His posture improved, his face grew tanned, the cold and the snow toughened him up: well-clad in fur boots, fur coat, and fur cap with ear-flaps, he was not bothered by the weather.

From time to time he went out to the forward positions with Colonel Petrov, sometimes inspecting the communication trenches, sometimes coming under enemy fire. And sometimes

they went out at night in white camouflage robes, with prisoners who were going to address their old comrades by loud-speaker.

During one of these nocturnal outings across the snow, when they were close to the positions held by Tcherkass and his men, Petrov suddenly said: 'I can't make you people out at all, you Jews. Private or general, you're different from everybody else. Take yourself, for example, Mikhail: in some ways you're like our own chaps, but then, on the other hand . . . Well, it sets me thinking: you're complicated people, aren't you, and nervous!'

Menahem was labouring with some effort through the thick snow; it crunched underfoot: this, and the steam from Petrov's mouth as he spoke, pointed to a heavy frost.

'Sasha,' Menahem asked him, 'what set you thinking about Jews? Has something happened?'

'No, nothing; I'm just talking.'

They walked on in silence, and watched the tracer-shells weaving their trajectories silently through the night sky, rising from some remote gun emplacement and falling into the dark mass of the forest.

'Look at what happened yesterday, for example,' Petrov suddenly continued. 'I had to send out a small patrol, to get us a prisoner for interrogation. I went off to Panov's company and asked for volunteers; eight men volunteered, and would you believe it? — they were all Jews, every one of them. I can tell a Jew at a glance, even if he has a completely Russian name. Well, it upset me — I don't mean because of the others, who didn't volunteer, but because of these eight. They didn't give themselves a chance to think it over, they just stepped forward. Well, were they tired of life? Everybody wants to go on living; it isn't natural to push yourself forward to be shot at, now is it? Yes, there's something funny about your lot, Mikhail. I like dealing with ordinary straightforward people, and you Jews aren't ordinary or straightforward. It scares me! What do you suppose they were thinking, those eight men? Do you think they wanted to show up the rest, the other men in the company, as a lot of cowards? All of them, Russians, Ukrainians,

Tchuvashes, Mordvins, whatever? They made me feel a coward! I look after myself, I don't go running into danger. I don't want to die; but your lot, you don't know what it is you want. What about this Colonel Tcherkass — is he a hero? I wouldn't say so. Every time there's a fight he's out there in front, running into the bullets before everybody else; but why? Not to get medals! No, he does it to prove that he's a proper patriotic Russian, he's dead scared that we might get the idea that he's scared! Well, I suppose that's how those eight volunteers saw it.'

Petrov thought again, and went on: 'Look, Mikhail, I've been a worker all my life, at the Putilov works in Leningrad. I've got nothing against the Jews: why should I? And yet, if you see what I mean . . . it's not hatred, but I just feel uncomfortable with Tcherkass and those eight volunteers and people like that. So I just dodge them: do you see how I mean?'

'Well, no, colonel: I can't say I understand at all.' That was all he could say; and then he suddenly remembered something that had happened a few days before. Zhilin the Political Commissar had detailed Menahem to read out to the men the official communiqué from the General Staff. Kalinin and Yeletz had just been liberated: the men sat in their trenches, drinking hot soup that had just been brought in Thermos flasks. 'Today our glorious army has liberated the following places . . . ' Menahem read on into a silence broken only by a distant chatter of guns. But then a sharp voice broke in:

'Hey, you've left out one of the towns which our chaps have taken!'

'No, I think I read them all out: here's the communiqué!'

'What about Tashkent? Don't you know that the Jews have captured Tashkent without a blow?'

The men all seemed amused: some of them hooted with laughter, others smiled uncertainly. Menahem went away, thoroughly depressed. This had happened in Panov's company.

'Well, how do you explain it? — in the company where that happened, nobody volunteering but Jews! You people want to have it all ways at once: we're cowards running off to

Tashkent, and then at the same time we're wildly and quixotically heroic. Make up your minds!'

'No, Mikhail, it's not as simple as that — you don't understand, I don't suppose we can ever get across to one another. You're all such nervy people!' And they left it at that.

Then, one December night, the Germans suddenly began a heavy bombardment, apparently in preparation for an attack. This came without warning after a long period of inactivity on both sides, and it found Menahem very near the front line. He took a few steps towards the shelter of the trenches and then felt himself wrenched up and flung down by a violent explosion. He lay half-stunned for a moment, face in the snow, and then realised that he was still alive and started to get up; but immediately there was another appalling crash and everything vanished in clouds of smoke. He fell again and rose at once, bullets and splinters howling and whistling about him: the noise and violence of it set his ears roaring, his veins throbbing, his limbs twitching. Then light speared through the tumult of flying snow and shone on him: ah, they've seen me, he thought: an easy target now. There's one too high, there's one too low: split the difference and you've got me, unless I'm lucky . . . It surprised him that he had not been hit already, lit up by the terrible menace and glare of these German flares; so he threw himself down again knowing that you must never keep moving under fire, you have to take a few steps and then get down smartly. On he went in that fashion, and eventually came to the trench and tumbled into it. someone was bellowing there, it was Tcherkass, with a soldier peacefully asleep beside him, or so it seemed, and another man tugging madly at an ammunition box, while on and on went the clatter of machine-guns. Across at the edge of the forest a great plume of smoke rose steadily, broadening and billowing out across the open ground: Tcherkass fired and fired into it like a man demented.

'A smoke-screen! — it'll be full of Germans, advancing behind it!'

Menahem faced this cloud as it grew and threatened, and as

fast as a soldier there could bring him ammunition, he fired into it.

Then — 'Fire now! at the smokescreen!' — and, a whole group of anti-tank guns fired a broadside that shook the trenches but also put out the German lights, so that they were in darkness. Then, suddenly, the German fire died down and the attack was suspended.

Tcherkass came across. 'Well, well! How do you feel, after that party?' He stared into Menahem's eyes, his face blackened with smoke, dried blood all over one cheek.

'You're wounded!' Menahem exclaimed.

Tcherkass wiped at the blood with his sleeve. 'Ah, that's nothing, just a scratch.'

They went in silence along the communication trench and found a telephonist lying face down. 'Hey, Volodya!' Tcherkass called, shaking him by the shoulder. The man opened his mouth and stared blankly around.

'Shell-shock.'

They tried to get him to his feet, but he fell as though paralysed. Tcherkass seized the telephone and tried unsuccessfully to get through to Regimental Headquarters.

'No good, the line's cut: and we don't know that they aren't going to attack again.'

'Look, I'm from Headquarters,' Menahem said. 'I'll go there now, and make contact for you.'

Tcherkass pressed his hands, and he left the trenches, still under fire; behind him, at the other end of the open ground, the shooting was still in full swing. But he no longer shook like a jelly at every bang, as he had recently.

At the edge of the forest he met Petrov. 'Where've you been, Mikhail? Caught in that bit of trouble? Go along now and cheer old Frolitch up — he's been praying for your soul already.'

'I've been with Tcherkass.'

'In the thick of it, eh?'

'Yes, and they've lost contact; we've got to keep in touch, we'd better send out runners.'

Petrov took his arm and went with him part of the way.

'There ought to be an advanced liaison and communications post, about here: I'll see Headquarters about it. And how's Tcherkass managing?'

'Well, he's still in one piece.'

'I daresay he is! He's already lost about half his men. He's a good fighter, but he doesn't look after himself or them. You've got to know when to stop and hold back, even when you're in a position to press on. That's what he can't do: he sees a German, and then he goes mad. You remember what Lenin said? — a leader has to be able to retreat when necessary: one step back and two steps forwards. But this Tcherkass, he'll never retreat an inch. I don't call that heroism! I understand him all right, personally, as a Jew: I see his motives. But he won't get away with it, anyone can see that: he'll get his medals all right, but he'll pay for them, by God! And not only him, his men will have to pay too. That's not the way to fight unless the battle's already lost — then, you're caught, no hope, no way out, and you fight like a madman with no idea except to kill as many of the enemy as possible before they get you. That makes sense, except that we're not fighting for a lost cause: our war has to be won, and it can be won. Tcherkass fights as if he'd been condemned to death.'

Three days later, a patrol of six men went out and failed to return. Those three days had been uneventful: the weather had been cold and windy, and the Germans had kept indoors.

Now, on the third day, the wind subsided a little and only a light thin snow fell on the fields and woods: and Petrov went off to the village, intending to go on through the forest looking for those six men. Menahem went with him: they wore white camouflage robes and hoods. In the open, the wind was still violent: they had to walk backwards so as not to have it in their faces. There were snowdrifts as high as houses.

It was a bit quieter inside the forest. They took the right-hand road towards the village of Zabori: they had to pass two clearings in the forest, and then turn left at the third; then,

after another half-hour's walking, they should be able to see the snow-covered roofs of the village, which was still in enemy hands.

The six missing men had been told to blow up the huts and drive the Germans out into the cold.

During this very severe weather the Germans relieved their sentries and outposts more frequently: and sometimes these men would shelter behind some fence, more interested in keeping warm than in maintaining a strict look-out.

Zabori was a small hamlet, of perhaps fifteen houses; a narrow track wound through the forest to Navilkovo and another to Merv. Merv was the centre or headquarters of the peace-time life of the forest, with wardens and offices and clerks.

As they went, Menahem and Petrov came across a number of their own outposts; the men there were tough Siberians in white fur coats and fur caps. They appeared suddenly among the bushes, their faces glowing ruddily.

'Come to pay us a call? Got any tobacco?'

Their positions were cunningly arranged: comfortable trenches and dug-outs, well camouflaged with branches and snow, packed and upholstered with dried leaves and moss.

'Come in for a warm!' cried one, a sharp beaky fellow.

They went down into the dug-out; it was pleasantly warm and stuffy there. They were offered drinks, and a bottle went round: Menahem took a pull and felt full of its warmth and comfort, light and frisky, and he started to hold forth about his home on the Vistula for the benefit of Petrov. The cold and misery of his chapped and cracked hands suddenly meant nothing to him: he felt on fire, delighted to be here, defending Moscow in these forest deeps, with death in ambush all round him.

'Think of it, Sasha: one day I'll be able to tell my children how I was there, defending Moscow. They'll want to know, and I'll have no need to be ashamed!'

He felt an overpowering sense of being united with these snowfields and forests: he felt one with the people of Russia, with the indifferent, frozen, cloudy, snow-ridden skies of their

country, with the dark forests in their remoteness and silence, now shattered by tanks and chopped to splinters by gunfire and then once again veiled in snow and shadows. All this aroused in him huge surges of warmth and affinity for the whole of God's creation: the tall splendour of pine-trees intoxicated him, the forest clearings with dark walls of mystery all round, the flat wastes of snow sparkling like the sea, the bare poplars that stood by lonely and remote cottages, the willows by winding lanes and by-ways — he was uncontrollably in love with the whole country, and thought constantly: 'Once this war is over, I would like to stay here, build myself a wooden hut and strike roots in all this beauty — at Tengushai, perhaps, beside the dear Moksha with those cornfields, those meadows!'

The earth was suffering, and in silence, taking them all to her bosom: Menahem burnt with love for his mother the earth, the soil of Russia.

On they went, with Petrov stopping occasionally to listen more carefully to what Menahem said.

'Your tongue, Mikhail! A mad bull cut loose and on the rampage, that's what it is!'

Snow fell against their faces as they pushed through the undergrowth, and soon they came to the first clearing. So far they had seen no trace of the lost patrol. There should be an advanced observation post around here, linked to the others by telephone.

The village of Zabori had been burnt down. A few smoke-blackened chimneys were still standing, already covered with snow after so short a time. They went on to the second clearing and found an old man who had lived in the village: now he and his wife were sheltering in a dug-out they had made much earlier, when German occupation first became a real danger. They had hidden their harvest there.

'Grandpa, what happened? When was the village burnt?'

'Yes, lads, all burnt! — nothing left of poor, poor Zabori. Our lads came in the night, they did, and the Germans had to run.'

He pointed towards the southern part of the village. 'Over

there, that's where my home used to be! Where you can see that little heap of ashes!'

His face was crumpled with misery, his beard straggled in the wind.

'Do you know where our men are?'

'I saw them, boys, I saw them! They're everywhere in the forest, hiding everywhere. Our lads aren't scared of a bit of cold, not them! They scratch about like deer, they skim around like birds, they're all right — good luck to them!'

On they went again for another ten minutes in the skirts of the forest, and then they suddenly heard voices: Russian voices, their own people.

A group of men sat in a small clearing, trying to revive a dying fire with dry branches: smoke curled up reluctantly over the snow. Menahem and Petrov came closer and were astonished at what they found.

Round the fire sat all six men of the missing patrol. They were playing cards, shouting, laughing, arguing. Nearby were two Germans, lashed to a thick oak tree with rope and straps, one of them with his face to the tree and the other facing the fire and staring at it with his one good eye. They were in good furs, with winter boots and caps; the Russians ignored them completely. One of them got up clumsily and spoke in a thick unsteady voice.

'Ah, Colonel! We were just having a little relaxation. We only finished the job yesterday, and we thought we'd have a bit of a warm before getting back to headquarters. You cold, eh, you two? — we've got the right stuff here, real German schnapps!'

'What the flaming hell d'you think this is?' Petrov exploded.

'See for yourself, Colonel — not blind, are you? We're just finishing with the cards, one minute . . .'

'Get up!'

They got up slowly and querulously, muttering to each other.

'My turn — I'll have the big one's boots.'

'Well, I'm having his fur coat!'

'Ah, shut up, you can have his belt!'

Menahem was astounded. 'What's all this?'

'Well, we couldn't agree how to share out their coats and boots, what those Germans are wearing; we argued about it, and then we thought the best thing would be to get out the cards and play for them. Old Stiopka always has cards on him. We've been playing ever since the early morning! Now, we'll all take our winnings. We've had to be careful, Stiopka marks his cards, we know him!'

They were all more or less drunk, just about able to stand up.

The prisoners were untied, and Menahem took charge of them.

'Here, give me that coat!' one of the men shouted. 'I won it, I'm entitled to have it!' And he came up to the tall German and said: 'Come on, Nazi bastard, let's be having you! -- one, two, three!' He pointed to the fur and grimaced impatiently.

'Get back! Three paces back!' And Menahem brought up his gun.

'What the hell do you think you are? Bloody office-boy! -- coming along when the fighting's over, and pushing us around! Look, you're not having that coat. This German took it off some poor sod of a Russian, why shouldn't we have it back?'

'We'll talk about all that at Headquarters. You can't do it here.'

They moved off. Petrov in a vile temper, muttering and cursing to himself, and the six men sobering up as they went: the wind sang and whipped across exposed ground, the razor-edge cold cut through them and blew out the cloudy fumes of schnapps. They grumbled angrily all the way: only Menahem was calm and cheerful. The two German prisoners walked in front of him, their arms linked and then tied so that they appeared to be walking affectionately, arm in arm. They kept stumbling on the uneven snow and struggling up again, always together, as one man.

Moments like this were like gold to Menahem. Everything around him was known and familiar, his own -- deep sky, plains of snow, bushes and trees. Nothing could be better or

more healing than to find himself in this situation: a Jew, a refugee, a lost wanderer in foreign lands, and here he was in December 1941, prodding two captured Nazis along with his own gun, on the Moscow front.

'Come on! Step it up!' His voice rang out hard and sharp, and in its echo he found a sudden image: Poland, a Jewish village, a ghetto, and his parents forced to wear the yellow star of David. 'Get on, damn you! No stopping!'

'What's the matter with you?' Petrov asked, irritably. 'If they can't be bothered to keep moving, we'll leave them here!' And he snatched Menahem's gun and held it against the trembling prisoners.

But Menahem was not always calm and in command of himself. The news which trickled in from the occupied areas was appalling. The official communiqués never spoke of the extermination of the Jews, but it was common knowledge nevertheless.

One day a Jew from Minsk turned up at headquarters: he had managed to escape from the ghetto at home and slip through the lines. Menahem gave him the official interrogation first, and then shut himself up with this Jew in one of the dug-outs for a long time. When he came out, Petrov hardly recognised him: his eyes were red and wet and protruding, he seemed feverish and utterly dishevelled. Petrov stood aside, disconcerted.

For two days after that, Menahem said nothing to Petrov or Frolich or anybody. He lay on his bed and smoked, the red of his eyes slowly changing to a cold steely blue. When Frolich brought him food, he pushed it away; at night he got up and made himself tea in solitary silence.

They left him alone at headquarters and did not bother him with questions. Colonel Petrov understood the state of his mind, but avoided his eye. Suzayev, on the other hand, made his irritation obvious. He had never trusted Menahem from the start: his low opinion of Jews in general, and of this Jew in particular, had been modified only partly and for a short

time by Menahem's repeated volunteering for dangerous patrols. He could not understand this at all, though he racked his brains for an explanation: a Jew showing courage? a Jew volunteering for danger?

Now he spoke of Menahem's two days of solitude and silence as a shocking breach of discipline. 'If he's ill, why doesn't he go sick? If not, he's got no business to wallow in self-pity like that!'

Petrov realised that Menahem would now seek the most dangerous duties, that he would cling to danger as if it were salvation and release; he thought more highly of him on that account, and respected his moods and silences.

On the third day Menahem got up before dawn, lit the lamp, made tea, and went to the headquarters dug-out. There he ran into Suzayev, who was shaking snow off his coat. 'Ah, I want a word with you. Come across at midday — but no moods and tantrums, understand? We're at the front here, you know.'

'Yes, captain, I understand.'

This day ended strangely for Menahem. Several German prisoners were brought in that evening, and they had to be interrogated quickly, one by one, before being sent on to Divisional Headquarters. There was no room for them in the dug-outs, and they couldn't survive waiting outside all night: some of them were barefoot, others in nothing but underclothes. Presumably they had been stripped by footloose bands of German deserters — there were many of these — before being captured by the Russians.

Petrov was away at a staff conference on this particular evening; Suzayev stood by for a time during the interrogations, following the talk between Menahem and a Russian-speaking prisoner from Poznan.

Menahem found his hands shaking as he wrote the German's name on the interrogation form: he had not noticed this before. He had felt generally restless and feverish, however, for several days and his voice had an odd ring to it. He felt burdened and bowed down.

Then someone called Suzayev away with an urgent message;

his bulky shape squeezed through the low door of the dug-out, and another prisoner was brought in.

Menahem paced up and down, staring at this German but saying nothing, biting his lips, holding back words that he felt could only be hot and mad. The German shrank back into himself, apprehensively.

Menahem pulled out a cigarette, and flipped savagely at his lighter without result: the wick was dry, the flint was worn down, or perhaps his hand was shaking too much.

'I've got a light — here!'

The prisoner took out a nickel-plated lighter: its tiny flame lit up his broad face.

Menahem sprang up, fist clenched, and sent the lighter flying across the room. 'Hold your bloody tongue!' The prisoner shrank back, cringing against the wall.

The noise of his own furious voice brought Menahem to his senses and his trembling under control. But he now felt a great wave of hatred rising uncontrollably within him, a monstrous and terrible sensation.

'Name?'

'Hugo Rudoss.'

An idea came into Menahem's head, irrationally but inescapably bothering him as he conducted the interrogation. 'What parts of Russia have you been in?'

'In the Ukraine at first, then in Byelo-Russia during the autumn.'

'Byelo-Russia?' In a flash of revelation he saw a peasant hut, a gnarled tree by the wayside. 'Byelo-Russia?' Then, very quietly, he asked: 'Were you ever in Minsk?'

Now he understood past doubting the nature and cause of his nervous tension: the prisoner would certainly admit that he had been in Minsk. That was it! and he felt something stretch and snap inside him as he faced that knowledge, the fact that here before him stood a German, a murderer, who had taken part in the killing of the Jews. How had he known? Had there been something in the man's appearance or bearing? Crime leaves its mark!

Clearly and distinctly the prisoner answered the questions put to him: his mind as well as his body seemed trapped and docile.

'Yes, sir, I was.' That had been a bad moment with the lighter, Rudoss thought: it was indiscreet, it was bad discipline to offer a casual light to an official Soviet interrogating officer. A prisoner's duty was only to answer questions. He felt no hatred or anger but rather a kind of respect for this Russian, a man who plainly had the right idea about discipline.

'Yes, I was in Minsk all right,' again.

'And did you visit the Jewish quarter? The ghetto?'

Menahem leant across the table, his eyes searching.

'Yes, I believe I did go to the ghetto once.'

An outsider would have been aware of no tension in this dialogue: it would have seemed like a casual preliminary exchange before the real business of the interrogation was opened. Rudoss took it that way, and was very glad to have only these trifling questions to answer, rather than the big, tricky questions that terrify every prisoner with danger, the false step leading to treachery. These casual questions gave him a breathing-space at least, and a chance to win favour by very correct replies; and he was utterly astonished when Menahem leapt up and shook him by the shoulders instead of going peacefully on with the interrogation.

'What were you doing in the ghetto at Minsk? Tell me! Talk, damn you! What happened to the Jews? Why were they killed? You were there, you did it! It's bloody obvious! Bastard!'

The German was shaking horribly now. 'Bu . . . but . . . remember . . .'

'Shut your mouth, you filthy murderer! You're murderers, all of you, you stink of blood!' And Menahem pulled out his revolver and dealt the German a vicious blow across the face with the butt-end of it. The man moved.

Sentries appeared down the stairs, and the German fell to his knees, blood pouring from his mouth, howling and beseeching; but Menahem smashed his butt-end down again, between his eyes.

‘What were you doing in the ghetto at Minsk? Tell me!’

The sentries were bewildered; one of them joined in, however, and gave the German a couple of punches for good measure.

‘Get up! Hitler’s finished! Bloody Nazi!’

The other asked Menahem what he should do with the prisoner.

‘Whatever you like, but get him out of here!’

‘There’s still two more to be questioned.’

‘I don’t want to see them,’ Menahem shouted.

‘Well, what are we going to do with them?’

‘Oh, ask Suzayev, ask Petrov, anything, but leave me in peace!’

But neither the colonel nor the captain was to be found; they were both out at conferences as there was an attack in preparation. Soon one of the sentries came back. ‘Those Germans are freezing out there. The sleighs are ready: shall we run them off to the assembly point?’

‘Get them away from my sight!’ And Menahem listened to their footsteps dying away, the prisoners complaining and the sentries cursing, and then he flung himself down onto his bed and pulled his coat over his face.

Frolitch sat by the lamp, repairing his winter boots, sewing on new soles with needle and waxed thread. Where did he get such materials? Heaven only knew. He kept a bag at his belt, full of tools and materials of all kinds: he was especially proud of a pearl-handled knife, which he had liberated (as he put it) from a German prisoner’s possession: a complicated knife, with scissors, screwdriver, corkscrew, file, pencil, fork, spoon, and three blades of different sizes. ‘There’s Germany for you! Fancy thinking up a thing like that, damn their eyes!’

He never let this precious knife out of his possession. If somebody tried to borrow it to shred tobacco, he would shrug. ‘Pass your tobacco across, I’ll shred it for you.’

With that knife he did miracles, patching overcoats, re-lining fur caps or fitting them with ear-flaps, making gloves out

of sheepskin. It was all done roughly, in peasant fashion, but very serviceably: his fur caps were bulky, you looked as if you had a whole sheep on your head, but you were kept warm, and at night they could be taken off and used as pillows.

Frolitch liked to talk to Menahem at night, when he was busy at these handicrafts.

‘A grand life it used to be, at Tengushai. Just think of it! — sitting down to a great bowl of soup, smoking and steaming up to the roof; all the family sitting there with their wooden spoons at the ready, nicely carved and polished. First just the thin part on top, and then you get down to the solid stuff underneath, but you wait until the head of the family gives the word — Come on, children, he says, eat it up now as it comes! And then you don’t have to be polite any more and leave the bits of meat — no, you shovel away to your heart’s content, and good luck to you! Then it’s all gone, and your mother brings in the porridge, thick and milky, your spoon would stand up in it, so thick and good! Go on, children, she says, eat it up and be grateful to the Mother of God, and St Nicolas too, he’s the one who looks after children; and afterwards you wipe your whiskers, and push the oak bench back, and up you get. Ah, you city people don’t know how to live, do you, Mikhail?’

He shook Menahem’s arm: ‘Hey, Mikhail, you’re not asleep? Open your eyes!’

‘No, I’m wide awake; go on, Frolitch!’

‘These city people, they’re a feeble lot, no guts or colour to them: a bit of cold finishes them: they’re no use at all to women. . . .’

The door of the dug-out opened suddenly, and snow whirled in on the icy wind: Suzayev and Petrov were back. They stood outside stamping and shaking the snow off their coats and boots.

Frolitch carefully folded his knife, wiped it on his trousers and put it in his pocket.

‘Hullo, you two,’ said Petrov.

‘Good day to you, sir. And is God still quarrelling with

his wife, tearing up the mattress and drowning us all in white feathers?’

‘That’ll do, Frolitch: no time for joking now.’ Petrov seemed in an agreeable mood, but Suzayev stood by morosely, avoiding Menahem’s eye.

‘I understand, colonel: I understand absolutely.’ Frolitch had not lived with horses all his life to no purpose. ‘I don’t need words to understand. For years now I’ve understood what the roan wanted to say, what the chestnut was thinking, just from a wink or a twitch: you don’t think I can’t see what you’re getting at, do you, colonel?’

He poured out glasses of brandy: they each had two glasses, and then Suzayev suddenly turned to Menahem and asked him where the prisoners were.

‘I don’t know,’ he answered, rising and coming across to the captain.

‘Who does know, then?’ There was silence then, apart from Frolitch’s thin dry coughing. He always coughed when there was any tension, any difficult situation at headquarters.

‘I handed them over to the man in charge of the sentries.’

‘Well, they haven’t arrived at the reception camp yet. Where are their papers? Did you interrogate them all? Divisional Headquarters want the interrogation reports.’

The table was littered with scraps of these forms, torn up by Menahem while he was interrogating the prisoner Hugo Rudoss.

‘Who tore these up?’

‘I did.’

‘You did?’ exclaimed Petrov.

‘Yes. I was interrogating one prisoner, Hugo Rudoss, and it turned out that he’d been at Minsk, at the ghetto there: he admitted it. The Germans shot twenty-five thousand Jews there on one single day — civilians, Soviet citizens. What should I have done with a man like that? He was there. Can’t you understand?’

Menahem could not keep still: he paced to and fro between

bed and table, shouted, thumped his chest. 'Thousands of innocent people, children, women, old people! And here he was, facing me. A Hun, a murderer, Hugo . . .'

'Did you shoot him?'

'I can't remember . . . I don't think so: I know I wanted to. No: he went off with the sentries — covered with blood, he was. No, I didn't shoot him.'

'Why didn't you do it, then, why didn't you shoot him, if you wanted to so much?'

'I don't know.'

'You don't know! But I do: it's quite clear to me!' Suzayev was in a murderous rage, his face flaming, his mouth foaming: for all his rank and dignity, he seemed crazy as if with drink. He gripped the edge of the table and shouted.

'I know why you didn't shoot this Hugo Rudoss of yours! You want to have your revenge on the Germans, but only so long as other people do your duty work for you. You're cowards! When you put on an act of being brave, that's cowardice too! If you weren't scared of us, you'd be going round the country markets buying up gold, you'd be sitting safe and warm in the gardens at Tashkent, you'd be stuck comfortably in factories and offices and hospitals, as far as possible from the front! Your enemies squash you like lice, and you haven't the guts to pay them back! Here's this chap, and he's killed twenty-five thousand Jews, you say, and you haven't enough stuffing in you to pull out your gun and put a bullet into him. Orders? Discipline? What do you care? You told the guards to do what they liked with him, didn't you? — you wanted them to do the shooting, not yourself, you wanted to keep your lily-white hands nice and innocent, didn't you? A nice clean conscience! — Then you could go back after the war and sleep sweetly — oh no, I never killed anybody, oh no, my conscience is clear, I come from a bloody marvellous noble virtuous race, I do! Every damned thing, somebody else has to do it for you! Even here at the front. . . .'

Petrov stood by, not interrupting, letting Suzayev pour it all out. Menahem stood still, frozen and stunned: he had a

strange sensation of his head as an empty skull, lying on some long-forgotten battlefield, while a hostile sky spat cold and bitter hailstones savagely against it.

Frolitch moved carefully between him and Suzayev, took Petrov by the arm, scratched his head, and coughed meaningly.

Petrov suddenly lost patience and took Suzayev by the shoulder. 'Steady on! That'll do.'

'Get out!' Suzayev gestured, suddenly tired, and sat down.

Menahem came back to life, stared hotly at Suzayev, groped vaguely at the air. A great shout hovered in his throat but never emerged; the table tilted and the empty bottle crashed to the floor. Menahem turned sharply and made for the steps: the door slammed behind him.

The wind outside made him gasp: he tried to walk but could not. Snowflakes melted on his face and down his neck, cooling the heat of his lips.

A sentry challenged him: 'Who goes there?'

He turned to the right, towards the forest: the narrow path shone like silver in the snow. He stumbled forward, back bent, right shoulder forward as though to force a way through the thickness of the night. Suddenly he became aware of the intense cold; the sweat all over him began to freeze; his clothes froze into stiff armour. Should he perhaps just sit down under a tree and just wait, not caring, for whatever happened next?

A sleigh came by and stopped, and an armed man challenged him. 'Who's there? Who are you?'

He came to himself with difficulty and saw medical orderlies, bringing in a badly wounded officer, who lay on the sleigh in great pain.

'Where's headquarters?'

'Over here: those dug-outs.'

The horses' breath steamed: the two orderlies lifted the wounded man from the sleigh.

'Who is it?'

‘Our company officer, Boris Solomonovitch Tcherkass,’ said one of the orderlies. ‘He’s done for, he can’t last long, He threw himself at a German tank, unarmed!’

Menahem helped them to carry the dying man into the dug-out; and as he went in, he brushed against Akim Suzayev, who was just coming out.

Chapter Eight

ALL day long Mme Korina would sit among her grandchildren, crowded together in her own little room; only that one room could be heated, with fuel so short.

Whenever a car went by, she would run to the window: one of her sons, perhaps? or Anna?

And she passed her days in waiting and watching, busy meanwhile with the children; their cots were all in her room, and when their mothers came home late every evening, tired and cold but cheerful and glad to be home, they would shake the snow off their cloaks and run eagerly to their babies, tucked up safely under their old grandmother's care.

The kitchen-work could be finished by the early afternoon, and then Mme Korina would install herself in her old green plush padded chair, and take two of them on her knee — Fatma, slant-eyed and black-browed, and Sasha, fair-headed and in fact no grandchild of hers. But she sang to all of them, strange incomprehensible songs: they understood not a word, but they loved the tunes and the rhythmic rocking of the *chau* that went with them. Oleg was the responsible one: if the bell rang, ~~he~~ he would run and answer in his little high voice, not opening the door unless he knew by the voice or the ring that the caller was someone familiar and acceptable. When their grandmother was out looking for bread, he looked after the little ones for her: he loved her dearly, and even forgave her for the nickname she gave him, 'Alioshele'. He would correct her: 'Say *Aliosha!*'

The war, with all its misery, had brought some peace and unity to the Korina family.

In the old days before that autumn, the young mothers had been at home together all the time, and the old lady used to sit by herself for days on end in her little room, rocking herself gently over an old book with silver clasps, apart from the tensions and altercations, one wife and mother against another. The Tartar woman from Kazan was not on speaking terms with the Ukrainian, but they were united against Mme Korina and Anna: they both wanted Anna's room, and they were both afraid that she might marry — another family to be squeezed into the flat, another mouth to be fed. There would be arguments, rows, slamming of doors so that the windows shook; and then some small person would run in tears to his grandmother, terrified and upset by his own mother in her anger, eager to be comforted. But then the door would open, with a furious, 'Come out of there, this minute!'

Sometimes, through the door, the old lady heard words uttered of so hateful and cruel a character that she sprang up, unbelieving, and paused by the door. Can such things be said, here in my own house, with the portraits of my dear good parents still watching us all from the walls? Here, where I've lived for thirty-five years? No, I must be imagining things: it couldn't be true. I've such devoted sons, such dear affectionate grandchildren. What can I be thinking?

But once, just before the war, Anna burst into her room in tears and flung herself down on the bed. 'Oh, mother!' she sobbed. 'They're saying beastly things! Here in our own home, they called us . . . I can't say it. . . .'

She lay there panting like a trapped bird; but then she suddenly flew up like a bird and flung all the doors open and yelled: 'All right, we're Yids, Shcenies! I'm not ashamed of it! I'll say it a million times, listen: Yids, Yids, Yids! You needn't mutter and whisper like that! I don't care! I'm not crying because I'm a Yid, but only because we have to live with people like you!'

Later on that evening, the man from Georgia came, the one who had married the divorced wife of Mme Korina's eldest son. He brought brandy with him, to oil the wheels of family

life; but he drank rather too much of it, and started to sing a vulgar song in very bad Russian, about the folly and empty-headedness of women generally.

The war started a week later, and a month after that the men were at the front and the women busy digging defences for Moscow. Then her daughters-in-law, including the divorced one, came to Mme Korina and begged to be forgiven.

'Sara Abramovna, don't be angry, please forgive us. We were cruel and unkind, but now this dreadful war has come down on us all, can't we forget our quarrels? There's enough trouble already, the Germans are killing hundreds and thousands of people. We are a family, after all, we're your people: don't be hard!'

And so she forgave and forgot everything and there was peace between her and the younger women.

But Anna was unyielding and taciturn: when her sisters-in-law made overtures, she just shook her head wearily. On the other hand she loved the children, played with them whenever she could, brought them presents — some tasty delicacy, a toy carved by a wounded soldier.

The fighting drew nearer, and Anna was hardly ever at home. She slept at the hospital now, as the unending stream of wounded men came in by day and night. Those fit to travel were sent off to the rear, to the Urals or Tashkent; long convoys took them away daily, with doctors and nurses in charge.

This first winter of the war aged Mme Korina considerably, bringing unsteadiness to her thin hands and easy tears to her ~~the~~ old eyes. Often she would weep quietly to herself in her dark corner, beside the shelf where her husband's devotional books were kept and cherished.

'One day she spoke to Anna about Menahem. 'I liked that soldier, the one who brought me a letter from you. I hope he's all right!' She spoke with great intensity, so that Anna looked up sharply.

'While he was here he took a book out of that shelf, and I remember noticing at the time how his hands shook and his lips moved. He could read your father's books, he seemed to

understand them! I had a dream about him last night. God keep him, God preserve him safe and sound!’

‘Oh, yes, the soldier who came here!’ Anna made a pretence of remembering at last. ‘He got wounded, slightly: I’ve seen him since then.’ But she could not understand the urgency, the pleading in her mother’s eyes: what did she want? She wanted something: that much was obvious from the way she stroked Anna’s forehead, from the tears in her eyes, from the words trembling at her lips unspoken. Only later, when she was leaving the flat, did she see what the old lady had been hinting at.

‘Remember me to him,’ she had said. ‘Don’t lose touch with him!’ She had remembered every detail of Mikhail’s visit.

Yesterday she had seen one of his drawings in a newspaper. How did he find the time for it? He must be well, anyway. She had cut out many of the drawings from newspapers and magazines and pasted them into a book, and she showed this book off to everybody at the hospital. ‘Yes, they’re by someone I know, a soldier, he’s been wounded and now he’s back at the front — his name’s Mikhail!’

These same drawings were displayed everywhere, making the war visible in streets and clubs and offices.

Zhilin, Political Commissar of the 316th Infantry Division, was in hospital for a week: Anna showed him Menahem’s drawings, and he smiled.

‘Yes, I know him all right, the chap who did those. He’s Mikhail Issakovitch, he’s a regimental interpreter. It was me who discovered him, Anna!’

She put one drawing after another before him, and waited anxiously to hear what he said.

‘Oh, he’s clever all right. But he isn’t one of us: you can see that in his drawings. The landscape’s excellent. Russia to the life, Moscow through and through. Yes, and the German prisoners are fine, done with wit and malice, yes. But the Russian soldiers come out queerly. Look at that one, for

example, Anna; look at him holding the flag of victory over a trampled swastika. Now, does that look like a Soviet citizen, a typical Russian? No, he isn't one of us, that chap, he isn't a Slav at all. He looks more like a . . . well, I can't remember what, but anyway he ought to look like a Russian, you should be able to see our own people there. Otherwise, it looks as if victory over the swastika isn't ours at all, but some other people has done it, and that's not fair at all — it's misleading and harmful. I don't blame him, he's new to this country, he only came here in 1940; he'll change, he'll learn. Meanwhile his drawings are useful, they're full of hope, they're a promise of victory over these Germans and their invasion. And that's what matters now — everything must be done for victory. He shows us how corrupt and degraded the Germans are — excellent, these drawings of prisoners, very suitable. And these ones, of the civil population being murdered — that's what we need now, to let everybody know about it, the outside world and our own men too: that'll put heart into them, and make them work and suffer; that'll make heroes of them!

Anna felt lost in this spate of words. What could she say? She knew by experience that with such people silence is best. But Zhilin was plainly delighted to have a chance of expounding his philosophy of the role of art in war-time to a young lady doctor.

'Now, consider the portraits of Gerasimov, Anna. What you find there is typical faces, the genuine Russian Soviet type. And why? Because Gerasimov is a Russian himself! And Repin, he draws genuine Russian faces as well. Have you seen that picture he did, of men hauling boats up the Volga? Wonderful! Now Levitan, on the other hand — he painted well enough, I grant you that, but only landscapes. A clever painter, but I've no time for sentimentality about the countryside: and if Levitan had tried to paint portraits of Russians they'd have come out like these that our fine friend Mikhail has done!'

Anna took the drawings back and tied them up with a green ribbon. She understood exactly what Zhilin had said, and even more clearly what he had implied; she wanted to look

him straight in the eyes and show him her tired surgeon's hands, and ask him: 'I see: and are these hands no good for surgery, just because they belong to Anna Samoilovna the Yid?'

'Did you hear Stalin's speech on the twenty-sixth of November?'

She looked at him wearily. Was this an interrogation?

'Yes, I heard it.'

'Splendid! Well, at one point he said "Fellow-citizens of Repin and Surikov." Now mark that well, Anna Samoilovna: Comrade Stalin did *not* say "Repin and Levitan": what he said was "Surikov". Now do you see the point, Anna Samoilovna? Eh?'

He seemed to be taking a malicious pleasure in using her father's name again and again: it was obvious from the way he said it. He would be going back to headquarters tomorrow, and no doubt he would see Mikhail there; she had thought of giving him a note to take, but now she thought better of it.

She wandered restlessly for the rest of that day, unable to concentrate; she put off an amputation that was on her list, and moved instead around the wards, hardly aware of anything. A voice called: it was the old doctor in charge of the hospital. He took her on one side and spoke to her anxiously. 'Anna, what's the matter?'

'Nothing, Semion Yakovlevitch, nothing.'

In the evening she shut herself into her own little room without putting the light on, and brooded: could she perhaps go home, very briefly, and see her mother? A knock at the door — Zhilin, no doubt, come to say good-bye before going off to headquarters. She ignored it. Then, an hour later, she jumped up suddenly, put the light on, took paper from her bag, and sat down to write to Menahem. What, she wondered, was he doing at this moment?

Moaning came through from the next room: it was the man who should have had his leg amputated today. His cries upset her more than was usual: she got up and hurried through to him.

'What is it, friend? Hurting, is it? I'll help you, as soon as I can: easy now, take it easy. . . .'

The wounded man's face was unshaven, bony, burning hot to the touch. He stopped moaning: Anna found herself in tears.

'It takes all the doctors that way at first,' an orderly remarked, seeing her.

The medical officer on duty was looking for her in the corridor. 'There you are, Anna: there's a car waiting for you, get your coat on. You'll be going up to a forward position — there's a man badly wounded in a dug-out there, a regimental headquarters, his name's Tcherkass. You'll have to operate on the spot.'

As she slipped her coat on, the table caught her eye, and the still unmarked sheet of notepaper.

It was warm in the dug-out where Tcherkass was lying. From time to time Frolitch fed dry wood to crackle in the glowing stove. A lamp swung slowly, dangling from the roof on a string: firing was going on close at hand, and the ground shook. Tcherkass lay as the orderlies had put him, on his back with his head hanging down. A dark cloak covered him to the chin and there was a dark patch under the bed, like snow trampled into mud.

Frolitch sat by, watching the wounded man and the steady rise and fall of the cloak, tiptoeing over very gently to observe him more closely.

'Mother of God, Queen of Heaven!' he whispered, twisting his fur cap in his hands.

A few hours earlier, the orderlies had applied a field dressing in an attempt to stop the bleeding. The wound was on the right side of the abdomen, near the hip. Now Tcherkass lay silent and exhausted, his eyes unseeing: half an hour earlier, he had been groaning and clutching at the cloak and the bed.

Frolitch turned to the wall and crossed himself inconspicuously, unseen by the headquarters staff and the medical orderlies.

He had always felt drawn to Tcherkass, and had often talked to him casually: a bit of tobacco? a glass of brandy? your boots

need mending, let me have them! Come in, Boris Solomono-vitch!

When had that been? In a past infinitely remote, or so it seemed now it was over. He stared at the dying man and felt the bitterness of it: he had seen plenty at the front — death, pain, mutilation — but this long-faced fellow with the dark eyes and the black brows had seemed near to him, almost as near as Mikhail. Frolitch knew that Tcherkass was not popular; that had showed in the look he got from Suzayev when he appeared at headquarters, which was unpleasantly like the look Menahem got. Now Frolitch longed to comfort Tcherkass with friendly words. The wounded man's breathing was shallower now, he noticed, and he came across and spoke gently.

'Hold on now, old friend. You recognise me? Dimitri Frolitch Savielov, that's me, the stableman from Tchengushai, now turned orderly at Regimental Headquarters.' He snuffled, and used his sleeve as a handkerchief. 'Open your eyes, old chap; the doctor's on his way, we'll soon have you in hospital.'

He could not go on; instead, he went across to the stove and raked and poked at it, still snuffling.

A car drove up outside: Frolitch ran up and opened the door, and Anna came in with her bag and went across to the wounded man. Frolitch hovered behind her, eagerly, his coat unbuttoned and his hat off, ready to follow her instructions.

'You've got it warm in here!'

'Yes, doctor, nice and warm in here, but it's a bloody sight warmer out in the forest! Listen!'

Anna got her coat off, her bag open, her white jacket on: then she took Tcherkass's wrist and felt his pulse. A shadow danced on the wall as Frolitch moved impatiently from one foot to the other.

'Doctor! Can't I help?'

Anna stood motionless, and Frolitch began to feel uneasy, scared by her silent and depressed manner. He watched her as she gently laid the wrist down and straightened the head and pulled up the cloak to cover the face; and she said nothing

to him, even while she took off her white jacket and put it away in her bag.

Her driver had been standing by the steps, and now he opened the door for her: only then did Frolitch understand that it was over.

'Doctor, come back! You've got to help him!'

'He doesn't need any more help.' Then, standing on the steps, she went on: 'Do you know Mikhail Issakovitch?'

Frolitch lifted his damp face: it shone in the glow from the stove and the light from the swinging lamp.

'He should be back in the morning: he's out on a patrol.'

Anna wrote a few words quickly and said, 'Give this to him.'

Menahem and Petrov came back before dawn and found Frolitch hard at work digging near the dug-outs, sweating away at the frozen earth with a pick.

'Too many roots, these trees have: the pick can't get in.'

'What are you doing, Frolitch?'

He answered them indirectly, flinging a clod of earth aside. 'Not a bad little spot I've picked on, by this big thick pine tree. Nice and dry here!'

'What? Do you mean that Tcherkass . . .'

Frolitch interrupted, nodding his head. 'Yes, and what I want to know is: who'll dig a grave like this for you and me? What'll happen to our bones? Ah, Mother of God, pray for us all!'

In the cold and misty light of early morning, the headquarters staff and a group of Tcherkass's own men stood around his grave. Here, they thought, was a leader: the first man out of the trenches when there was an attack, the last man to think of withdrawal. When his company had to withdraw, he used to stay out in front with a machine-gun, covering their retreat.

'He'll be all right, here among the trees. The roots'll tangle up, they'll wind him up good and proper, and then he'll be part of this big tree, part of the earth.' Frolitch was talking to Menahem. 'He'll look up and see the sky between the little

green branches at the top, and he'll feel every puff of wind through the trunk and the roots.'

Late that night Zhilin arrived and summoned the headquarters staff together for an urgent conference. Regimental, supply and intelligence officers came too; they all gathered in a dug-out.

Zhilin sat on a rough platform, talking to Suzayev and Petrov; Frolitch found himself a place in a corner and sat shredding tobacco; Menahem sat beside him and stared at the resin oozing out of the pinewood boards of the floor. 'It's the heat that does it,' Frolitch whispered to him.

Menahem had not spoken for the past hour: he sat in a moody silence, and Frolitch could not draw him into conversation. Whenever he spoke Menahem just nodded, as though in total bored acceptance of everything.

The soldiers filed in, unbuttoning their coats and removing their caps: the long dug-out was crowded.

The Political Commissar read out first a list of men who had been awarded medals by headquarters; then he handed some other lists around among the officers present, and they whispered together casually before turning to the real business of the occasion, which would no doubt be some important announcement by Zhilin.

This came at the end of the conference, with the introduction of Zagorov, a very young man just out of training, who was to take over Tcherkass's company. He had stood there unnoticed until this moment; now, when Zhilin called his name, he came out from his corner and across to the platform.

'Divisional Headquarters has ordered me to make the following statement to you,' Zhilin announced, and started to read:

'The duty of a Soviet officer is not only to destroy the enemy, but also to protect the life of every Soviet soldier. The fewer we lose, the more we win. Unfortunately the deceased officer Boris Solomonovitch Tcherkass did not discharge this duty.'

Menahem's head dropped to his hands, and his knees trembled: he felt Frolitch's hand on his shoulder, warm and soothing.

'As a soldier, the deceased did display a kind of courage. It was, however, courage not properly founded upon faith in our victory over Hitlerism; it was based rather on a personal desire for self-sacrifice. He displayed an individualistic and self-centred spirit, and this deprived him of the understanding, the adaptability, the wisdom that an officer must have. Instead of developing these qualities, so necessary in a Soviet officer, he merely hurled himself against the enemy, in gross indifference to the standing orders that the chain of command is essential to victory and that the lives of officers must therefore not be squandered. The death of Boris Solomonovitch Tcherkass is to be thought of not as heroism but as suicide; and that is something highly reprehensible, since the suicide is a coward and cowardice is treason.'

Zhilin paused briefly, then continued. 'Divisional Headquarters express a severe censure upon Captain Akim Suzayev, in charge of Regimental Headquarters, and also on Colonel Alexander Petrov, for not drawing attention to these defects, which have led not only to the death of Tcherkass himself but also to unnecessary exposure of his unit to enemy fire; as a result of which, the losses in this company have been the highest in the whole regiment.'

The conference dispersed but Menahem remained behind, sitting with Frolitch on a ledge, head in his hands. Frolitch was asleep; he lolled forward, still holding his tobacco pouch. Menahem looked as if he were asleep, too, sitting there with his elbows on his knees; but he was wide awake, oppressed and crushed with misery, and he stared emptily down at his own muddy boots and the dirty bit of floor beside them.

The stove burnt low, the lamp flickered, and it grew cold in the dug-out. All of a sudden Menahem rose, stretched, shuddered: he wanted to weep or howl for grief and loneliness, to mourn for Tcherkass and Feigin and the countless Jews in the ghetto at Minsk, for all the Jews who had died already and were to die in the future.

The dug-out was littered with cigarette-ends and waste paper, and foul with tobacco smoke. He tightened his belt

and took his gun. Frolitch woke up and watched him from the corner.

'Look, wick's smouldering — must have burned dry. Better put it out, eh -- can't find another wick too easily, can we?' He rose and stood by Menahem, hoping for a casual relaxing chat about trifles: but all he got was the same long obstinate silence.

'Now, Mikhail, where are you off to? It's late!'

Menahem opened the door and a roar of artillery fire came in: the barrage before an attack.

'Looks like there's something on tonight, eh?'

Cold surged in and filled the dug-out.

Frolitch went bounding up the steps in pursuit. 'Mikhail! Wait! I forgot, there's a letter for you, from that lady doctor! You can't read it in this dark, come back while I get the lamp and the fire going again: real brass monkey weather, I call it.'

And so he banged the door shut again, and stoked up the stove and raked up the ashes and nourished the faint spark that remained with bark and twigs until a cheerful flame leapt up, so that Menahem could read Anna's note in its red light. Frolitch fussed around behind him and looked over his shoulder at those few lines that Anna had scribbled so hurriedly: they meant nothing to him, but he knew how much they mattered. The strange thing was that such a tiny note could mean so much. Only doctors could write like that: they knew the secret. Look at prescriptions: just a few words, but enough to save life. And these few words here kept Mikhail staring at them for a full half-hour or more! She must be a pretty clever writer: it only took her a moment to write it, as you might strike a match and light the lamp. Ah, there's some clever people around.

These last days of December were fine and clear, crisp and frosty; for the men scattered everywhere in trenches and dug-outs there was exhilaration in the brilliant morning sun and the dazzling depth of snow that crackled sharply underfoot. During the short hours of daylight they would shave and then

wash vigorously in snow till their faces glowed: the cold fine air cleared out their lungs, and the hot food brought up in insulated cans from the field kitchens was quickly dispatched.

It was the best part of the winter. Before the war this was the time to get out low tapered sleighs and go off to the forest behind horses gasping out great clouds of steam, and then throw off jacket and gloves and collect great heaps of firewood. There would be hay to be fetched also, from distant meadows, piled up high on the sleigh and brought in to the cattle-yard; or you could slide off to some lake or river and chop a hole in the ice and arrange nets to trap fish overnight. Then home to the warm stove, the singing samovar, the children's bright eyes, the women's bright clothes: off came the damp boots and leggings to dry by the hearth, and then it was time for a great wooden bowl of soup, all comfort and warmth.

Early spring and early autumn were the worst times: the roads a quagmire, the woods impassable, the damp penetrating everywhere, boots sodden and squelching, clothes like sponges, leggings clammy, faces pinched, eyes full of rheum and sleep. Summer was the time for work, the peasant at it all day, collecting wood for the winter to come, working in the fields: and all for the collective farm, with hardly a moment to work at your own tiny holding, and before you know where you are it's harvest, potato-time, hay-making, all in a rush.

Now in their trenches, the Siberians and men from the Volga found it hard to sit still. 'Just the time to have a go at the Germans!' They wanted to be up and attacking: there was no more autumnal gloom, no more terror in the night, no more demoralisation and panic when the German dive-bombers came over. They knew, now, that the Junkers 87 and 88 did very little damage, for all their howling: only ordinary bombs came down, the howling came from a siren fixed to the wing-tip and switched on as the dive began. 'Clever bastards, aren't they!'

New uniforms were issued, with warm underclothes and thick fur jackets: food and weapons and ammunition arrived punctually and abundantly: there was a bigger ration of spirits.

The whole country was rallying. Action! Victory! The posters were everywhere. Convoys rolled all night from all over Russia, converging on Moscow, a dark river that never froze; the trains poured in, an endless stream of wagons over the white land.

The men chafed for action: they were used to exposure and hard work in the winter woods and fields, and they yearned for axes and timber and fine horses, galloping across fields and forest glades of white crystal.

Up and doing! 'Ah, how long have we got to sit in these holes — let's get up and see the world!'

They volunteered for night patrols, many of them, and disappeared in their white hooded camouflage robes to become part of the country, white bushes, white trees, sliding joyously through the dark over fields and valleys and woods and rivers, slipping through the German defences, blowing up buildings and vehicles, mining the roads, snatching up prisoners and dragging them bound and gagged under the noses of their own outposts, dynamiting railways, setting ammunition dumps ablaze.

To all this, the Germans would reply with long barrages, blind but heavy, beginning and ending suddenly, with total silence afterwards: it was all regular and predictable, the Russians knew when it was coming. There was nothing half-hearted about it: once the German reconnaissance aircraft had spotted even a small concentration, down would come a heavy hail of mortar-fire. But they usually aimed at decoy targets: the real preparations would be going on somewhere else, subtly camouflaged.

The Germans liked to put their mortars and machine-guns in barns and huts, so as to fire through the windows while their crews had the benefit of Russian stoves; and they used to relieve their sentries very frequently. The Russian winter was too much for them: a very short time in the open was more than they could take. They spent the day indoors in those barns and huts, huddled over stoves, and when they were taken prisoner they usually had frost-bitten limbs and hollow faces, for all the

sweaters and silk underclothes and furs they wore. They would stand and gape like geese, unable to breathe or speak for the cold, and the bulk and variety of their clothing gave them an ignoble and ludicrous appearance. The Russians would stare at them, first in astonishment and then in contemptuous mockery as they saw and understood their enemy's weakness. The master-race? — look at him, just a tip of blue nose sticking out of a great bundle of rags! Conquerors of the world, lords of the universe!

The Siberians roared and rolled with laughter, their awe-stricken fear of the Germans, their technique and their irresistible might gone for ever.

'All nonsense! Just look at them!'

They were hungry birds, at the happy point of discovering that this terrifying one-legged man with his threatening arm is only a straw scarecrow: the braver among them hop down onto the dead stuffed face and tweak out bits of straw, just for bravado. So with the Russian army before Moscow, during these brilliant days of late December; they understood suddenly that the mighty German foe was only human after all, vulnerable, scared, a ridiculous figure cuddling the stove in rags, liable to fall on his knees when captured and cry for mercy, holding out miserable dead fingers to arouse compassion. Just a scarecrow, they thought.

Menahem's drawings found wider and wider circulation in military and civilian papers and magazines. He drew caricatures of the Nazi leaders, and these — signed by 'a Jew in the front line' — were made into leaflets and dropped over the German lines: malicious sketches of the Fuehrer and his ministers and generals, with an especially good one of Goebbels as a bird of prey. He drew likenesses of the generals who had made elaborate plans for the victory parade in Moscow; and he gave ironical titles to all these drawings — 'The Master Race and the Russian Winter', 'Where the Goose-step Took Them', 'The Marvels of German Technique'. This last drawing showed a great heap of debris — wrecked tanks, burnt-out

lorries, crashed aircraft, all with the swastika clearly showing.

Divisional Headquarters sent a special messenger to collect the drawings as they were produced. 'We need them badly, Mikhail Issakovitch — they're as useful as tanks.'

Many of them were hanging in the dug-out, above Menahem's bed. 'Ah, you've got a good eye and a good hand, you have!' Frolitch would say. 'One look at those German generals of yours, and there I am splitting my guts out laughing! But you, you're always miserable, never a smile out of you!'

One day he was writing home, and he asked Menahem to draw him on the letter. 'Take it, Mikhail, there's a space just there: put my ugly old mug there so that they can have a look at me. But, hey! don't do me like you did those German generals! My poor wife would get the shock of her life!'

Menahem sharpened his pencil and got to work to oblige him, and soon Frolitch was staring happily at his own face on his letter home. He could not bear to post it for weeks afterwards: it stayed in his pocket, and was pulled out and shown to one and all.

'Can you tell who that is?'

'Then, one day, a paper came with another of Menahem's drawings in it, and Frolitch recognised himself there too, and became very emotional about it. 'You see, old Frolitch the stableman doesn't count for nothing. I'll go home, and I'll show it to old Ivan with his wooden leg, and Vassili Gavrilovitch too, and old mother Periferovna; I'll knock them all end-ways when they see it, they'll see it's me to the life, as like as two peas!'

He cut out the sketch carefully, using the smallest blade of his famous knife, and folded it away in an inside pocket.

'Right, tomorrow I shall send off that letter, and this picture too. Now I'm happy, Mikhail. There'll be something for me surviving after all: my wife will put it up alongside the ikons, and she'll say to the neighbours: that's Dimitri Frolitch Savielov, of blessed memory, that is.'

Later that night he came over to Menahem and took out

that splendid knife and whispered: 'Take it, Mikhail: a present from old Frolitch.'

'Thank you, Frolitch, but I can't take that.'

Sleep was slow in coming to Frolitch that night. He moved restlessly between his bed and the stove, piling on more wood. The sleigh-bells of home were ringing in his ears: perhaps it was old Vaska, driving along behind Crafty, a horse recognisable at once by his distinctive trot and snaffle. Brownie was quiet, nosing about in his manger; he's had three days' rest, why not get him working tomorrow? Here in Tengushai all roads meet, running in from Kulikovo and Krasni-Yar, from Bashkirtzi and Atcnino, from Dudnikovo and Kalamasovo. How quiet it is in the village! — no sound but the wailing of Anushka's baby. Marfa must be unable to sleep — there she sits, embroidering a blouse, while lame old Vanyushka goes hobbling and sneezing outside her window. What an old wolf, what an old goat, peering up at the window for a glimpse of her shadow! He must be having the time of his life, now, with all the young men off at the war! Will Marfa let him in, or won't she? Ah, the snow in the stable-yard, all silver-blue and untrodden! And there will be just lads to look after the horses, to take them out to the fields and the work, half-starved, when spring comes: they'll just scratch the ground with their plough-shares, they will, and nothing will come of it but thistles, and then where shall my poor people find a bellyful of bread?

He rambled on and Menahem listened, sharing the huge grief in his voice and his eyes. The same vast sorrow enclosed them both, the same melancholy snowfields, the same freezing up of lakes and rivers, the same loneliness in remote places, terror in the infinite forest, despair in the leaden skies of winter: they suffered together the approach of famine and the death of their people.

The fire flamed up weakly, and Frolitch held out to its faint light a letter he had received from his wife at Tengushai.

'Read it to me again, Mikhail: just once more. It makes things a bit easier.'

He sat cross-legged by the fire while Menahem read.

'To the soldier Dimitri Frolitch Savielov, from his wife Anastasia Yakovlevna and the children Vanyushka, Kolka, Yegor, and Zina. God grant that this letter may find you safe and sound. First I must tell you that we are all well, except for Zina, she cannot come down from the stove as her legs are none too strong. Old Maria Periferovna says that she will be all right in the spring, once it gets warm. And I am afraid that the potatoes in the cellar are nearly all gone, on the other hand you are not to worry. Please write to tell us whether they feed you properly and whether you have warm clothes. I have put a sheepskin aside so that Nikolitch can make you some nice warm new fur boots. And when the goat gives milk again, I should be able to put some money by and then buy you a pair of galoshes. Here in Tengushai things are very sad indeed, they keep bringing letters saying that people have fallen for their country, and I am very glad to say that no letter has come about you, and may God keep you safe and sound. The horses in the stables are all dying of hunger. Ivan Khromoi is now the manager of the collective farm, all he does is drink and crawl around after Marfa, him being lame, and he takes her lots of corn and flour. Old Nikititch is dead. Molkin's cow has calved, they have some milk now. There is no bread to buy at market now, only wooden bowls and spoons, old men bring them from Modianka and sell them. That black sheep with a white patch on its back belonging to Lozhkin, it has been stolen. That is all the news from Tengushai. Please write and tell me if you have met anyone from here, and what the people you are with are like. We always think of you when we sit down together for a meal. May God keep you safe and sound. Your loving wife, Anastasia Yakovlevna of Tengushai.'

And now, at Divisional Headquarters, a report on Menahem himself was called for, and a Special Branch officer came to question him. A complaint had been lodged that he had abandoned the interrogation of a German prisoner and had sent him away to an unknown destination. This prisoner, Hugo Rudoss by name, had never arrived at the reception

camp, and Headquarters had never even received the completed questionnaire form and the prisoner's personal papers.

The investigation was thorough: it took several hours. First Petrov was called, and came out a few minutes later looking hot and flustered. Then Menahem was summoned: Akim Suzayev led him to the door of the dug-out. 'They're ready: apparently there's some fuss about that prisoner, and Colonel Galinkov of the Special Branch wants to hear your version of the story.'

Menahem looked at him, surprised at this sudden politeness.

'It's nothing important. Did you know that General Pliskin was asking after you? And that doctor, Anna Samoilovna? She came here, but couldn't find you. Well, it's good to have friends — your own people, after all!'

Colonel Galinkov came forward to meet him. They all sat down, and Suzayev passed around a tobacco pouch and cigarette papers.

'Is that stuff strong?' the colonel asked. 'I can't smoke mild tobacco.' He spoke hoarsely and abruptly: a broad-shouldered bull of a man, his head mounted low as if on no neck at all, his turned-up chin almost meeting his turned-down nose, his eyes very deep-set, flickering and darting like little fishes in a tank.

'Pleased to meet you, my name's Galinkov. Sit down, Mikhail Issakovitch. We'll make it short, it isn't important: it depends on you, as a matter of fact. I like your drawings, by the way: I didn't know it was you who did them, I only found that out recently.'

Menahem looked up at the ceiling, blew out a cloud of smoke, and then suddenly brought his eyes down and stared at the colonel's peculiar face.

'If you look at me like that, I'll think you're going to draw a caricature of me!' the colonel said, smiling.

'Don't worry, I only do caricatures of German generals.'

They all laughed in an uneasy temporising way.

'Well, Menahem Issakovitch, how do you find it here among us Russians?'

A thick cloud of smoke rolled towards Menahem, like a cloud among mountains. He nodded, but this was not enough for the colonel.

'Look, I'm here in my official capacity. This isn't a private chat, and I must ask you to give clear answers to my questions.'

The questions followed, briskly and in order:

· Your name?

Date of birth?

Place of birth?

Nationality?

Party membership?

Occupation?

Social background?

Relations?

Have you been abroad at all?

Then, in the middle of this interrogation, a sudden descent to casual talk about Frolitch, about Tengushai, about Menahem's plans for after the war. Did he hope to go back to Warsaw, or would he stay in Soviet Russia? Why hadn't he tried to enlist in one of the special Polish units that had been formed?

The tobacco-smoke coiled round again, hiding the table and then clearing and drifting away. Galinkov's eyes seemed to have disappeared entirely: there was just the round dome of his wrinkled forehead and two narrow eye-slits.

'I can't see why you didn't try to get in with your own people. That's what I'd have done in your position. It can't be easy for you among us, a quiet retiring fellow like you!'

Galinkov paced about, stopped suddenly in a corner and asked: 'What actually did happen about that German, Hugo Rudoss?'

'Nothing happened. I told the guards to take him over. He'd been at Minsk, in the ghetto: he was a Nazi murderer. All Germans are criminals, of course, but some of them are wholesale murderers. Hugo Rudoss was one of those who murdered the people of Minsk.'

'Ah, I see now what you mean.'

There was a painful silence, while they both groped for words.

'Now listen to me, Mikhail.' Galinkov came round and put his heavy paw on Menahem's shoulder. 'It's hard for you. I know how it is for Jews just now: you're full of bitterness and fear and negative ideas of every sort, you only see the bad side. Your whole history makes you that way; it makes you pessimistic and unhappy, and then it's hard to manage you — why, you can't even manage yourselves. You're like sick people! You're exactly the opposite of what a Soviet soldier has to be just now. Mind you, I do understand, you have my sympathy all right: I'm not against Jews, my own wife is Jewish, she comes from Odessa. You ever been to Odessa? Well, anyway: I don't care twopence for this German, what's his name, Rudoss; as far as I'm concerned they can be shot down like animals, the whole lot of them, and the sooner the better. But we have to remember discipline: this is the army, the Soviet army, and it's up to the army to decide what's to happen to every prisoner!'

'But I did hand him over to the guards!' Menahem explained again.

'Yes, yes, yes, you said that before! Don't try to fool me! A prisoner doesn't get interrogated, his documents are torn up, and he vanishes! Right: as far as we are concerned, he's escaped: perhaps someone took him back to the German lines, perhaps he's back with his unit. Let me tell you that there's good reason to think so!'

Menahem stood up. 'I don't understand: what do you mean?'

'Do you think the Germans haven't got secret agents, even here? They're clever enough to pick on the people we're least likely to suspect — yes, Mikhail Issakovitch, even Jews! We've got documentary evidence that there are Jews here, working for the Germans.'

'So now I'm a German spy, am I?' His jaw fell and his eyes bulged: his voice collapsed into a sob, a choking in his throat. He stood there dumb and shattered and turned towards the window by the door.

'Steady on, Mikhail, I'm not accusing you! Perhaps I'm not making myself clear: you mustn't think I suspect you of

anything! Speaking quite personally, I think very highly of you. Let's regard this as just a casual talk: look, I'm tearing up my notes, it's all cancelled and forgotten! But just the same it's a good thing that we've got to know one another: and you do understand now, I think, that we've got a Special Branch in the army, and that we who are in it keep our eyes on every single thing, even in these days, so very difficult for Russia. So just take care, and you'll be all right!' He smiled, his eyes twinkling innocently.

Frolitch stood in the door, with the rations he had fetched from the field kitchen. 'Comrade Colonel, I have the honour to explain myself. Name? Dimitri Frolitch Savielov. Rank? Private soldier. Occupation? Steward here at headquarters. Previous occupation? Stableman for the collective farm at Tengushai.' He did not smile, but there was a look of malicious satisfaction on his face.

The colonel took his hands. 'Well, then, Frolitch, let's see what kind of steward you are! Don't you know how to receive guests? That's bad, that'll need looking into! Drink, man! Something to drink!'

In a moment there was food on the table, and brandy and glasses as well. Menahem pushed his brandy away.

'No, thank you.'

The colonel was raising his glass. 'To victory over the Germans! Well, come on, Mikhail, what's troubling you?'

Menahem lifted his glass reluctantly: some of the brandy slopped over. 'To a free Europe, and friendship between races!'

A few days later, Menahem was commissioned as a lieutenant, and awarded a medal as well. The notification of both these honours came from Divisional Headquarters, and it was read out before the officers of the regiment; no doubt this was the reason for Galinkov's visit and enquiry since all promotions were subject to Special Branch scrutiny and approval. Only after arriving at regimental headquarters did Galinkov meet Suzayev and hear about the disappearance of Hugo Rudoss; and he did not think that this matter warranted cancellation

of Menahem's promotion and a disciplinary charge against him, as Suzayev had hoped. The promotion had first been proposed after Menahem's visit to Divisional Headquarters, and by reason of the part he played in breaking up the demonstration in the streets on the day when Willy Rapp had died. The official notification of it also mentioned Adrian and Zakhar, who had since been killed in action: the medals would be sent to their families.

Frolitch celebrated Menahem's promotion fittingly; for two days on end he could hardly stand up. All day long, he sang wild improvised songs about the rosy girls of Tengushai, the deep grass of its fields, the rippling blue of its lakes; he capered about, slapped his thighs and knees, and chanted endlessly a monotonous refrain of glory and delight."

When he danced, his age was apparent: his face was contorted with effort, the hair that fell across it was grey, he puffed and he blew. He loved everybody, and pressed tobacco on one and all. 'Help yourself. I've got plenty. Just take a look at that flint! — a real one, from our parts, that is: one flick and there's your flame!'

Drunk as he was, he could still notice a torn sleeve, a dangling button, a shoulder-strap out of place, a buckle coming unstitched; and by next morning everything would be properly repaired.

'Frolitch!' men would shout at dawn. 'Did you do this? — Thanks!' He never bothered to answer, but flew about in his felt boots, bringing up wood for the stove: then a twig would flare up and illuminate his honest battered old face and his gnarled hands as he broke up the wood and fed it in, carefully peeling off and putting by the birch-bark. And warmth filled the dug-out, and the men jumped up from their plank beds to find their leggings dry and their boots clean.

On just such a morning Anna came, in snow-white boots, white fur coat, white fur hat, and with actual snow all over her — eyelashes, brows, long hair down to her shoulders, all silvered with snowflakes.

'Come in, doctor: have a warm, it's nice in here!'

Anna took off her hat and gloves and looked round the dug-out, blinking in its semi-darkness after the brilliance outside.

'Good morning, Anna Samoilovna!' said Menahem quietly. 'I'm happy to see you.'

'Oh, Mikhail! . . . it's so dark in here, I didn't see you!'

She gave him a small warm hand, and there was about her a freshness of snow, pine resin, the sharp exhilarating air of a winter's morning. She sat down on the edge of the bed, leaving her fingers in his hand.

'I came to congratulate you: I'd heard they'd given you a medal, and now you're a lieutenant!'

They drank tea and sat in silence. Then Suzayev and Petrov appeared and greeted them courteously.

'What's this? Tea?' said Petrov. 'Frolitch should have got some vodka for a favoured guest like you, doctor! One day, sooner or later, we'll find ourselves in your hands. Well, you can do what you like with me then, only don't amputate my head, I need that to drink vodka with!'

Suzayev was beaming and shaking hands all round. 'Frolitch!' he roared.

But Frolitch took no notice: he knew when to answer and when to lie low. Vodka at this time of day? He'd been in trouble over that already. 'I ook, I'rolitch,' Suzayev had said, 'if you hear me shouting for vodka in the early morning, let me shout myself hoarse, but don't bring it: got that, stupid? Right: if you do bring it, I'll have you filleted and kippered and then court-martialled!'

So he smiled to himself and fussed over the stove.

'Look, Frolitch,' Suzayev said. 'Today's an exception. Bring it just this once! I shan't curse you for it: it's in honour of Mikhail's promotion.'

Anna took her leave. 'I can't stay, I'll come another time; I've got to go to the tank people now — where are they?'

'I'll arrange an escort,' Suzayev answered, grinning at Menahem.

Snow fell softly and lazily as they went, settling slowly on the

treetops and branches and the trees torn up and partly exposed, their roots tracing dark shapes in the air.

Anna walked slowly, turning back often to look at Menahem.

The snow gathered on her, clinging to her hair and brows but melting at once on her soft lips. He found himself wondering how warm her lips would feel.

The narrow path wound between glades and bushes and hill-ocks and brambles and roots, all disappearing beneath the snow.

'Who knows what there is under the snow? We won't see the damage done, not properly, until it all melts in the spring. The sap will come out of all these broken trees, in the heat of the sun, and it'll bleed down into the earth; but the blood will all have soaked away by then.' He spoke sadly.

She smiled, her eyes large and bright. He looked at her with astonishment, as though he had never noticed this before. And she smiled because she loved his foreign accent: she had never known anyone who talked as he did.

'Isn't it quiet!' he went on. 'It's never been as quiet as this before, at the front. There's no good in this silence; there's fear underneath it, something in the air, some dreadful event preparing. I'd prefer to hear an aeroplane in those clouds, or even some machine-gun fire, or artillery in the distance. I'm out of my depth with peace and quiet, now: I can't help feeling that there's somebody creeping up behind to knock me down.'

They stopped under a big pine, to shelter for a moment from the whirling snow.

'Anna, my home is far away, very far, and I know that terrible things are happening there, the same as at Minsk. And yet I manage to keep quite calm, quite under control; I have to keep calm, my fingers mustn't tremble on the trigger. I must identify myself completely with these others, the men in the trenches. I'll learn to sing like Frolitch, I'll swill vodka with them, I'll laugh as loud as anyone! But God, let me only keep enough sanity to keep this sky and these forests before my eyes; and your face, Anna.'

He took her hands: she took off her gloves and ran her hands over his face, wiping off the beads of melted snow.

'Oh, Mikhail! your eyes are so soft and warm!'

She tried to pull away; but he came closer, bending forward.

'They're waiting for me!' And she pushed him gently away: but just for a moment he felt her lips on his forehead, and she was gone, waving from where the tanks lay squat and ugly under their camouflage.

There was hard weather and hard work that winter. Regimental headquarters was extended and refurbished, new reserves of men poured in, sappers cleared stretches of forest and built new dug-outs: they worked continuously in the open, sawing logs, hacking away at the frozen earth, ripping out great tangles of roots, perfecting the system of trenches and dug-outs. There would be supply dumps now, and proper living quarters.

Every morning, Menahem used to go round the trenches, reading out to the men the daily communiqué from Supreme Headquarters; and every night he would go out with Petrov on patrol.

On one occasion, coming back from a distant outpost, he paused to rest and take cover in a trench that ran by a burnt-out village and twisted through a wooded valley. Petrov had gone off with the escort in charge of two prisoners, who had just been addressing their own people on the loudspeaker. It was after midnight; the night was still full of the noise of machine-guns, the Germans' usual reply to those loudspeaker appeals; searchlights cut across the sky, and bullets rattled everywhere like hail on ice. Better to stay here in the trenches, Menahem thought, than to struggle on along the forest trails among the dark undergrowth, pitted with shell-holes now filled with snow, into which you could fall too easily and often, emerging with face torn and battered by briars and splinters from mashed trees.

It was dark in the trenches; a light shone on him. 'One of ours.' Then a hand guided him along a narrow track; on one side were trees, snow-covered and waving gently against the sky, barely visible in the faint light reflected from the snow;

on the other side a white slope, stained here and there with dark shapes.

A door opened suddenly, and Menahem was led into a large dug-out, where an oil lamp flickered faintly in the hot stuffy air. Several men were sitting on a bench, some with their coats undone in the warmth.

'Someone from headquarters, I suppose.' Menahem greeted them, but they went on playing cards, taking no notice of him.

'Any news, comrade lieutenant?' someone asked at length.

His eyes grew accustomed to the near-darkness, and now he could see faces.

'There's been a prisoner here just now. They're frozen solid, those Germans. We'll make them skip.'

Then a rat-like little man, short, thin and beaky, left the group who were playing cards and sidled across to Menahem. 'This fellow isn't a Russian!'

'How do you know?' another of them asked.

'I can tell: there are ways of knowing!'

'That's interesting,' Menahem smiled. 'It must be a gift you have!'

'Yes, like a bloodhound,' said a sarcastic voice.

Then the little one cried out: 'He's a Shecny! I can always tell Jews by their smell, I can tell them miles away. Take me into a room blindfolded, I can tell at once if there's a Jew there!'

They put their cards down and stared at Menahem. 'Yes, he's got a good nose for sniffing out Jews, that Stiopka.'

'But there aren't any to find! They're all tucked away safely at Tashkent and Alma-Ata!'

'Well, we've found one now, so there's no need to sneer. Here is one of them, and he's a lieutenant — look at his new shoulder-straps! Well, young fellow, you'll be a general in no time, I'm sure!'

Menahem groped for the door, anxious to get away: a long trudge through dark forest would be better than this.

'Don't run off, now! Stay here, we're only having our bit

of fun!' the little man said. 'It won't do you headquarters lot any harm to see what real soldiers are like!'

Then he stepped back nervously as Menahem strode across to him. 'So you don't like Jews? Just keep your bloody-mindedness under control until the Germans take you prisoner: that'll be the time to start your anti-semitic campaign!'

The little man laughed in a dry evil way, then snorted, and pushed himself forward truculently to where Menahem was standing. The others stood perfectly still.

'The Germans don't kill them for no reason at all, you know. They deserve it: if it hadn't been for them there wouldn't have been any war.'

Menahem went for him, fists flying, and sent him sprawling at the others' feet.

'Ah, let him alone, he's drunk. You don't want to fight that sort! He's a bloody fool; leave him be!'

A general buzz of conversation broke out then, and they went back to their cards, taking no further notice of Menahem and the rat-faced man: he just rolled about on the floor for a time and then curled up in a corner.

Menahem rolled himself a cigarette, and stole across to the lamp to light it, his hands trembling again, his face on fire, his temples throbbing.

He left the trenches in the darkness before dawn. The searchlights had a pale and faded look, and one by one the stars were dying.

Chapter Nine

IN an amazingly short space of time, a complete military installation had blossomed out of those few dug-outs in the clearing near Navilkovo. It was like a town, with a high street of twelve dug-outs, six on each side, invisible except for their snow-covered roofs and their smoking chimneys: here were a staff office, a communications and signals section, the administrative office for the regiment, ordnance stores, armouries, workshops, a medical centre, and heated accommodation for the men who worked there and for armed guards.

The forest swarmed with men; there were sentries and check-points everywhere, men stood at the ready in fur coats with machine-guns and rifles and fixed bayonets, and there was no more free and casual moving about at night.

Things had altered profoundly during these last few weeks: the very appearance of the officers and men was different. Now they were smart, well shaved, ruddy-faced, healthy: at night you would hear cheerful singing to the music of an accordion.

There were two nurses now in the medical centre, Nadiezhda Pavlovna and Zinaida Karpovna. Frohitch was the first to make their acquaintance and offer them hospitality.

'I think you're a shocking old wolf,' Petrov told him. 'Don't let your wife get to hear of this.'

'She'd think all the more of me! You don't know about women; you'll get the idea when you're a bit older.'

Menahem laughed. He had changed, too: he seemed taller, straighter, his shoulders less drooping; he walked with his head high and his chest out. Previously he had walked like a man creeping anxiously through a low narrow door: now he walked as if the road lay clear before him, and himself well

able to shoulder aside anything that got in his way. His voice was now sharp and incisive, with edge and ring to it.

Nadieżda Pavlovna was tall and solid and stout. When she laughed, her cheeks and her cleft chin dimpled hugely; and she laughed whenever anyone called her, or greeted her in passing, or called for medicine. All day she was busy around the dug-outs in her white jacket: the sentries hooted and whistled and tried to stop her, but she always slipped by. When she first came, the medical centre was besieged by men wanting chilblain ointment, with low thoughts also in mind of getting to know these nurses.

Zinaida Karpovna was the senior nurse: small and light, with big almond eyes.

The day after their arrival found them already with Frolitch in the dug-out: Zinaida was trying to borrow something to read.

'I'm almost sure we had a book somewhere,' said Frolitch. 'What happened to it?' He scratched his head. 'Yes, I have seen it, it didn't have any covers.' And he grubbed around, and produced a sadly tattered and torn little book.

'But half the pages are missing, the beginning and end too!' Zinaida cried.

'Ah yes, they've been smoked. Our boys use them for making cigarettes, ignorant hogs they are. Why can't they use old copies of *Pravda*?'

Meanwhile Zinaida was looking round the dug-out and saw Menahem's drawings.

'Let me introduce you: this is our Mikhail!' said Frolitch. 'He did a likeness of me, and I sent it home to my wife: real clever hands, he has.'

Zinaida smiled shyly and studied the drawings. 'What's this one of?' she asked Menahem, pointing to a group of nearly naked men behind barbed wire, skeletons rather than men, with a dark sky over them split by lightning.

'Those are Jews, condemned to death by the Germans.'

'How horrible!' She drew back and closed her eyes. 'I feel frightened of drawings like that — not because they're horrible,

but because they make you despair, you want to go and jump in a hole or go to pieces with shame and revulsion. They don't put courage into you — they just make you dead and helpless and apathetic.'

Her words surprised Menahem. After a pause she went on. 'Draw a clenched fist, tough and steely, draw it in strong vigorous strokes: that'll do more good to me than all these miserable long dying faces! They only depress you and demoralise you: go for strength and power instead! Look, I come from Leningrad, I worked in a hospital there, and I tell you I felt quite stifled and finished there among dying men and cripples and people who'd had their legs amputated or got frostbite! But here, what I see is tough strong healthy men, sure of themselves: that spurs me on to work for victory!'

Menahem found himself suddenly at sea, not sure what to think. Should he tell the world what was happening, or should he keep quiet about it and keep his knowledge of the dying men and the torturers and the mass graves to himself? At night the dead haunted him, clamouring for revenge; were their sufferings to be secret and hidden? Yesterday he had seen the first official report of the slaughter done by the German invader: whole towns had died, there was a list of them — Minsk, Grodno, Vilna, Rovno — and in each case the number of deaths quoted in the report was the same as the Jewish population. But the word 'Jew' occurred nowhere in the report: it was always 'Soviet citizens' who had been massacred.

When the two nurses had gone, he spread out his drawings before him and looked at them again with new eyes.

Was she right? The battle was joined before the gates of Moscow, and the future of the world was at stake: precisely how important were the sorrows and troubles of one single Jew caught up into that battle?

That night, Zhilin the Political Commissar turned up unexpectedly at Headquarters, covered in snow. He came in and sat down by the stove.

'It's bloody dark in here,' he said crossly. Nobody answered: he was in an ugly mood.

'Something's happened,' Frolitch thought as he fed the stove.

Zhilin went on sarcastically. 'So I suppose before long you'll install a generator and have electric light, eh? No doubt you've started on the wiring already?'

He stared angrily at Petrov and Menahem. 'Yes, you look after yourselves in here all right. But the trenches are a shit-house, do you know that? No discipline, no supervision! And then what? Bickering, fighting, and then these two deserting! I've a good mind to have the lot of you court-martialled!'

Frolitch, in his alarm and agitation, could hardly get the fire going. He fumbled, dropped bits of wood, filled the dug-out with smoke.

The previous night, two men of Lapatin's company had suddenly jumped up from their trenches before Navilkovo and started running across the snowy expanses of no-man's-land towards the German lines. A searchlight was turned on them: they were unarmed, and plainly deserting. The Russians opened fire, but the Germans shot first: the men tried to take cover in the snow, but they were being shot at from both sides. The shooting went on till dawn, and then the men were seen lying half-way between the Russian and German lines. Now, this evening, a Russian soldier had crawled out to the riddled bodies and brought back their papers.

It was well-known that all the men who were deserting at this time had their homes in areas occupied by the enemy. An order had come from Supreme Headquarters, therefore, that men who came from places west of the front line were to be formed up into special units under close punitive discipline and sent off to work in the mines in the Urals.

Menahem felt Zhilin's eyes on him, though his face was in shadow and invisible. Conversation died away: even Frolitch was sullen and silent, with no jokes to offer for once. Then sleigh-bells jingled outside, the door was flung open, an icy wind came in, and Zhilin was called away.

'A nice frost coming on! Good time for it, too: new year.' Frolitch was cutting long thin shavings, holding a billet of wood

between the shelf and his chest, paring it with his knife held in both hands.

'That's how we do it at Tengushai, to save oil; we use shavings like this, lots of us, cut from pine-wood nice and long and straight.' He was not usually taciturn, but Zhilin's angry visit had reduced even him to silence. Now the weight had fallen off his tongue.

The stove crackled and cast a warm glow around it, and the light shone more hopefully. Petrov snored, his mouth open; he would be off for the trenches in a few days to command his own battalion. So far he had been kept at headquarters because of his age and his wounds: now he was deemed fit for front-line service. Menahem had also been passed by a medical board. Things were changing for them now: wounded officers would be arriving to take over their jobs — only Suzayev would remain.

'New bosses, Mikhail. Let's have a drink — I've got some of the real stuff here. I feel miserable, let's cheer ourselves up a bit.'

Out came the bottle from its hiding place, and Frolitch poured the spirit into tins.

'Best of luck!' He put the tin down and wiped his whiskers. 'I've had a letter from home. I read it over and over, I haven't finished with it yet. And I never told you — there was a note for you from Lioska. Here!'

'Lioska?' Menahem furrowed his brow.

'Yes, Lioska Molkin of Tengushai, you remember? Oh, Mikhail, you'd never forget a nice bit of blossom like that, would you?'

Menahem opened the letter and looked at the large clumsy handwriting, uneven and with many corrections. Frolitch held a burning spill so that he could read.

'I hear from Nastasia Yakovlevna, the wife of Dimitri Frolitch Savielov, that you are in the same unit as her husband. She and I both cried with happiness when we heard that you are both alive and safe and sound. I would come and see you, if I could, and bring you warm winter clothes. But perhaps I'll be able to see you in the spring, as all us girls will

be sent then to the forests round Moscow to cut wood for railway engines to burn. I'm getting ready for this already. It's very sad here, every family is in mourning. We have not heard anything about my father or my brothers. I would like to grow wings and fly to you wherever you are. I hope you don't mind me writing like this. It makes me cry when I remember how there wasn't anybody to say goodbye and see you off when you went away to the war. You have nobody to mourn for you if anything happens! But when the war's over and you're out of the army, come back to Tengushai however you are, crippled or not, and there will always be a place for you at our table. Every day I pray in front of our ikons for my father's safety and yours too. Write to me, Mikhail. From Alexandra, of Tengushai.'

Frolitch lit one spill after another while Menahem read: he was beaming with admiration for Lioska. 'That's good, you know! That girl's got her head screwed on the right way!'

Menahem felt deeply moved, close to tears. He wrote to her: this was the first letter he had sent from the front.

'Thank you very much, Alexandra. I shall never forget Tengushai, and still more I shall never forget you. You're right: I have nobody left in the world. My people are dying and I can't do anything to help them. Life is very difficult sometimes — I don't mean the ordinary hardship of war and the army, I mean something else; I don't think I can explain it in writing so that you will understand.'

He stopped writing and looked round him. Petrov was still asleep on his plank bed, on his back, one foot dangling over the side; Frolitch had fallen asleep as he sat there, his precious pearl-handled knife hanging from his belt and swinging rhythmically. The walls shook with the distant thunder of war, so that sand and earth trickled in through cracks. The lamp was swinging. Had something started? Were things moving at last?

There was a sudden roar outside as a lorry drove up: the door banged open and a soldier shouted into the dim light of the dug-out. 'Colonel Petrov!'

Menahem flung on his fur jacket and went out. 'What's happened?'

'There's a prisoner — an officer, apparently.'

'Bring him in.'

Petrov woke, peered sleepily at this soldier and Menahem, and fell asleep again.

'Frolitch, get the fire going, let's have some light!' Menahem seized him by the arm. 'Come on, get up!'

The lamp came to life and Menahem saw the prisoner standing rigidly between two soldiers: a hatchet-faced man, creased and scarred. He looked barely alive, his face like plaster, his lips grey.

'Mikhail,' Petrov muttered. 'Interrogate this bastard and send him away — the sight of him makes me want to spew.' And he lay down again and looked at his watch. 'I could have slept for another hour, but this pig has to turn up and spoil everything, and before breakfast, too.'

Menahem signed to the guards. 'You want us to go?'

'Yes, this'll take half an hour. You run along, Frolitch will call you when it's time.'

They went off, leaving one of the headquarters men sitting on the steps and fiddling with his gun. Menahem arranged his papers and felt in his pockets, studying the prisoner meanwhile.

Frolitch stared at him also. Was he made of wood, or something? A wooden German! Yes, if you put a match to him he'd blaze up like tinder! Except for those rat's eyes of his, they're horrible, you couldn't feed them to the dogs: the dogs would go mad if they tried to eat those eyes. . . .

'Come here, please.'

The German took a cautious step forward, as if he were walking over a minefield. He held his head up and looked straight ahead.

'Sit down.'

The prisoner took no notice, not even looking at Menahem: he still stood rigidly, as if on a ceremonial parade. There was a stubborn insolent look to him: he apparently thought himself in charge of the situation.

'I said sit down!' Menahem said more sharply. 'You're a prisoner now, do you understand?'

A real German, this one, and very much the officer, even here. For a moment his insolent and authoritative bearing had impressed itself on Menahem, making him feel docile and subordinate: a humiliating moment. He frowned, and bit his lips till they hurt, and felt his gun for reassurance, its hard metal against his thigh.

'Not talking? Why not?'

The German moved slightly and replied in a dry acid voice. 'You are a Jew. I do not talk to Jews.'

Menahem twitched up as though a snake had bitten him, tugged out his gun at the prisoner, but paused, irresolute.

Frolitch came up and took his hand. 'Easy now, don't go dirtying your hands, you won't do any good that way.'

Petrov sat up vaguely, yawning. 'What's all this?'

'This bloody German here, this silly bastard,' Frolitch began, anxious to cut in and prevent Menahem from replying.

But: 'He won't talk: we're wasting our time with him,' Menahem cut in, and called the man in who was waiting on the steps. 'Hey! Take this fellow away.'

The soldier came in and prodded the prisoner in the back with his gun. 'Come on, move!'

But the prisoner surprised them all by turning to Petrov and speaking in good Russian. 'One moment! I did not refuse to speak: that creature is lying. I will not speak to a Jew! But I am perfectly prepared to be interrogated by a Russian: I am an officer, and I have things of the utmost importance to say.'

Petrov grew angry and red: he stood in the middle of the dug-out and puffed and snorted.

'Take him away!'

The door closed on the prisoner, and there was a long silence. Petrov paced to and fro, and eventually stopped facing Menahem.

'Look, are you an interpreter or not? You swore to obey all orders faithfully, and now you're playing the fool with us. Why didn't you tell me what the German actually said? You're

supposed to translate exactly: instead of that, you fly at him. Our patrols risk their lives to bring in someone who'll talk, and you just dismiss him. That's no good! What the hell d'you think you're doing?'

Menahem replied steadily. 'What did I do wrong? What would you have done in my place, if the German had refused to speak to any Russian? Do you think we're fair game, to be insulted and trodden into the dirt by everybody? — by a prisoner, even? Should I have explained to you what kind of fuss he was making? Should filth of that sort be spread around and listened to, in the Soviet army?'

Early in the morning, Petrov had a talk with Suzayev, and then they both spent a long time on the telephone to Divisional Headquarters. And so it came to pass that Menahem was led away there by two sentries, having first been relieved of his revolver and his sub-machine-gun.

'Am I under arrest?'

'Don't ask me, that's their business, they'll sort it out.'

Frolitch wiped an eye furtively. It was broad daylight now, and a cold mist was hanging between the bushes, silver-grey, lifting as the day advanced. The well-trodden forest path stretched into the distance, a rivulet under white clouds.

Menahem was silent all the way, ignoring the cheerful gossip of his escort, blind to the beauty of the woods as the mists curled up and the snow was gilded by the morning sun. He marched head down, staring at the trampled snow and horse-dung before him; his arms were folded, hands tucked into the sleeves. His thoughts hovered between the captured German officer and the spiteful thin man he had met in the trenches.

Great cataracts of despair overwhelmed him, the flood-gates of his mind breaking suddenly and stunning him; a million mad birds crowded twittering into his head, and his temples throbbed and his knees shook as he walked.

Where were they taking him? But he did not look up or ask his escort.

They arrived at nine, and he was left waiting in a large open

courtyard fenced in with barbed wire, with an armed sentry at the gate. A long time passed, and nobody came.

He sat down by the wall. The courtyard was full of sun, gentle winter sunshine, pleasantly warm. He felt sweat on his face, and his knees seemed useless.

Some soldiers ran by without coats: a voice somewhere shouted into a telephone: a door banged. Then a lorry came to the gate, with a green tarpaulin cover, and some more captives were led into the courtyard, unbelted, unshaven, their long ragged coats held together with string instead of buttons. They were lined up against a wall, checked against a list, and counted and re-counted several times.

At midday, a soldier came and told Menahem to follow him: they stopped outside a door in a long corridor.

'You're to go in and see the colonel,' he was told sharply. 'Quick march!'

Colonel Galinkov sat facing him across a table: he took no notice of Menahem's greeting, not even looking up, but pored over the litter of papers on his table. 'We've met before: I didn't expect our paths would cross again so soon.'

His words filled the little room, echoing harshly like a shout in the forest. 'Sit down.'

Menahem sat down.

'Quiet, aren't you?'

'You haven't asked me anything!'

'Oho, so it's an interrogation you want, is it? Right!'

Menahem felt that this was going to be a pointless discussion, nothing so solid as the interrogation of an accused man. But perhaps the situation was not actually like that at all.

Then the telephone rang. Galinkov ignored it for a time, and when he did take it up, his face tightened and his eyes rolled savagely so that Menahem could only see the whites.

'What?' he roared. 'Right, I'll come now: I'll be there in half an hour. Court-martial, yes! We'll show them!'

It was a different man, now, standing before Menahem: his voice thundered now, instead of crackling dryly. He banged the receiver down and shouted. 'Do you know what your

behaviour amounts to? No, I don't suppose you do. Well, it's treason, bloody treason! The problem is to find out who you're working for: a difficult problem, I dare say. Either the enemy, or else the devil himself! Yes, the devil! But at this moment we don't care who you're working for; you're not working for us, and that's enough!

Silence followed, Menahem watching the colonel steadily.

'You're from Poland, I think? Yes, a Polish Jew. Well, what are you doing with us? We've got quite enough Yids of our own. You could have got into the Polish army, but you dodged that. You've got some secret scheme. What the hell are you up to?'

The accusation was so vehement and unexpected that it knocked Menahem off his balance for a few minutes. Then he pulled himself together and calmed down, feeling curiously invulnerable to Galinkov's tirade. Through a window he stared at the serenity of a deep blue sky, the peace of the wooded distances.

'Well, why don't you say anything?'

'There's nothing I can possibly say if you accuse me of treason. Me, a traitor! Have I ever held back from the worst and heaviest firing? Wouldn't I volunteer for it now? They made me into an interpreter, that meant close and continual contact with Germans, and then I found race-hatred in the Russian army too, directed against us, against myself! How would you have reacted? Do you really think I've behaved like a traitor?'

Galinkov was not listening: he opened the door.

'Yes, yes, you're wasting your time. You'll have a chance to speak up for yourself: the order for your court-martial has been signed already.'

Menahem spent two days in a barracks, sleeping on a bare plank bed. Once he was sent out to sweep snow in the courtyard. Men moved about listlessly, their shadows long on the evening snow and across the barbed wire. One of them spoke to him.

'What are you in for, lieutenant? Defeatism?'

Menahem could not answer.

In the morning, the cold felt murderous and piercing. He had eaten nothing for these two days, he had kept out of the queue for soup. That evening, several of the prisoners crowded round him with loud concern: one of them fetched soup and black bread for him. 'Go on, eat it, you don't want to starve!'

He looked without appetite at the black bread, the thick steam rising from the thin soup; but he managed to sit up and take the bread and swallow it in lumps without chewing it. The warmth of the bowl thawed his icy fingers; the soup warmed his lips, and he muttered vaguely to himself.

'How did you get sent here?'

'Don't know.'

'Talking too much?'

'No.'

'Tried to nip across to the Germans, eh?'

He looked around sharply to see which of them had asked that. 'What did you mean? I wouldn't desert — I'm a Jew!'

'Oh well, if you're a Jew, that's obvious, isn't it?'

'He didn't want to fight — Jews are scared of fighting.'

'Don't talk nonsense,' another said.

'Well, he must have wanted to dodge the column!'

'Listen, you,' Menahem said. 'No Jew tries to dodge any column. That's a slander! I'cherkass didn't, Feigin didn't, I didn't.' And he added: 'I was interrogating prisoners and I couldn't control myself when I saw those swine at close quarters: that's all.'

Early in the morning of the third day, Colonel Galinkov's clerk came and told Menahem to shave and smarten up his coat and get ready to go in an hour's time.

'Where to?'

'No idea. Don't be late.'

A little truck took them not towards Moscow but along a snow-covered lane. Menahem peeped out: the country seemed familiar. Where was he being taken? But the guards did not speak, and he did not ask them: what difference did it

make? Out there on the snowy fields, or within the grey walls of a Moscow barracks: it came to the same thing.

How lovely the pine-trees were, mantled in snow! Here, along by the road, they were thin and pliant, so that the weight of the snow bowed them down across the road to make a series of gateways or triumphal arches. The chained wheels of the lorry thumped along the snow in a heavy obsessive rhythm. What would Anna make of all this? Did she know yet? Suzayev would certainly have told her the glad tidings at the first opportunity.

On went the lorry between the trees, and he became calmer, even indifferent. What had to come would come in its own time. Soldiers came to this frame of mind during a long artillery bombardment: explosions all round you, a deepening haze, black smoke and choking yellow fumes, and before long you feel a helpless and uncaring victim of fate. Once, during such a bombardment, Menahem had simply folded his arms and waited: there is nothing you can do under bombardment from artillery or from the air. In this fatalistic mood he arrived again at his own Regimental Headquarters and saw once more that little town, that double row of dug-outs so well made and so carefully guarded.

On this cold bright day in late December, he came and stood before his court-martial. They had just finished the case of a man who had shot himself in the hand in hopes of being sent to hospital and then home as an invalid: the bullet had made his hand useless. But in the ambulance it had been noticed that the shot had come from very close quarters, the hand pressed against the muzzle: the man's clothing was scorched and stained. There was no smoke or scorching on the hand itself, but it was decided that the man must have wrapped a cloth around it before firing, so that only the uniform showed the mark. The sentence was short and sharp: immediate execution.

Menahem saw him led away, one arm bandaged and in a sling. He stared horribly, red-eyed; outside, he fell on his knees and buried his face in the snow and roared. They jerked him

up again, and he started pulling at his clothes with his undamaged hand, exposing his chest and tearing at himself until the blood came. His screams resounded through the forest, then died down in a threefold echoing crash.

The court-martial was held in one of the dug-outs. Five men in uniform sat at a table, and Menahem recognised Galinkov among them. A sentry stood inside the door. Above the table, portraits of Lenin and Stalin were hanging. There was a soldier looking after the stove.

Menahem stood to attention, head up, while two of the officers whispered together and the others leafed through their papers.

The man at the stove slammed it shut and came over to stand beside Menahem. Galinkov rolled tobacco in a scrap of newspaper, occasionally glancing at the prisoner.

'You may sit down.'

'Thank you.' A sentry pushed a stool across.

Galinkov blew out a cloud of smoke, waved it away with his hand, and said in his harsh voice: 'Right. Let's get to work.'

One of the armed guards came across to Menahem and rattled his gun. 'Stand up!' The order was barked out violently, it seemed to fill and shake the dug-out, and then this soldier took his place beside Menahem, gun in hand, standing rigidly, tight-lipped, eyes steely.

'Lieutenant Menahem Issakovitch, you stand accused before a field court-martial. You will be tried by the judge, Captain Lavrenti Semionovitch Karpov, assisted by two assessors, Lieutenant Alexei Kuzonitch Platonov and Lieutenant Nikita Yacovlevitch Zakhenko. The prosecutor is Colonel Stepan Nicolaiyevitch Galinkov.'

The judge, a short man, round-faced and bald, glanced pleasantly towards another officer, sitting at a corner to his left, in shadow: only an oval face and a gleam of spectacles could be seen. 'This is your advocate, Lieutenant Vladimir Arcadieyevitch Nordin.' The bald judge went on, 'The accused has the right not to accept the official defence advocate, but to conduct his own defence instead.'

He looked at Menahem interrogatively, and the defence advocate rose in his place. His glasses shone cheerfully: a little man, narrow-shouldered, long-faced, square-chinned. He seemed more small, more inconsiderable than the others; he came across in his worn boots and shabby uniform and smiled at Menahem, who felt at ease with him and nearly held out his hand, remembering in time that he was supposed to be standing to attention. He nodded at the judge, to indicate his acceptance of this advocate.

Then came a series of questions, some of them tricky.

His name?

Place of birth?

Nationality?

Education?

Party membership?

Military service?

Relations abroad?

Friends in this country?

Their addresses?

Where do they work?

What languages do you know?

Any previous trouble with the law?

Social background?

Date and place of enlistment?

How did you come to Russia?

Have you sent letters out of the country?

Have you had any reply to them?

They fired their questions steadily, and he answered at once without stopping to think. Nobody seemed to be paying much attention to his answers: they shot a new question at him while he was still answering the last, so that he had to break off. They went on and on, sometimes asking the same question two or three times, sometimes speaking so hurriedly and casually that it all seemed a tedious preliminary formality.

‘I’ve already answered that question,’ he said at one point.

‘What?’ said the judge, pop-eyed. ‘Have you really?’

Menahem felt astonishingly calm and clear and sure of

himself. His muscles were firm, his knees were steady, his tiredness had gone.

'I do beg your pardon!' said the judge. 'I must have overlooked your first reply. 'What was it you said then?' And he leant forward, elbows on the table, to stare at the accused man. Galinkov watched impatiently and then whispered something: the two assessors nodded.

The charge, a relatively brief one, was read out: the judge assumed a new expression and a hard voice to read it.

'The accused Menahem Issakovitch, Lieutenant in the 316th Infantry Division, Regiment 62, is accused of a breach of military discipline, in that he broke his oath. His behaviour in the regiment had attracted the attention of our prosecutor, but no steps had been taken, since strictly speaking one cannot charge a soldier with not sharing our patriotic feelings, with not having a Russian mentality, with being in our country only by chance. But the accused's dangerously foreign mentality imposed a severe strain on the discipline of his unit, as became apparent in the very serious breach of discipline which he committed; and in time of war an act of this kind can only be regarded as treason. Three days ago, a captured German officer was brought to Regimental Headquarters. Instead of submitting this prisoner to a close interrogation and preparing a faithful translation of his replies, which would have been of vital importance for the operations then impending, the accused allowed himself to fall into a fit of hysterics, the consequence of individualistic and narrowly patriotic habits of mind, and then gave a false account of what the prisoner said. The prosecutor had already noted a similar and earlier incident with another prisoner, Hugo Rudoss. Taking into account the fact that the accused Menahem Issakovitch has not displayed cowardice or showed any inclination to desert, but has on the contrary repeatedly volunteered for the most dangerous patrols and battles, for which reason he has been promoted to lieutenant and awarded a medal, the prosecutor does not demand the supreme penalty. However, the prosecutor does demand, in the name of military law, that the accused should

be reduced to the ranks and sent to a disciplinary unit for war criminals.'

The last phrase shattered Menahem. 'War criminals?' Once again a steel circlet closed tight around his brows, once again his hands trembled: he clenched his fists and bit his lips.

'May I say something?'

He started to sway unsteadily, and the soldier at his side pushed the stool under him. But with an effort he stayed upright, holding onto the edge of the table, digging his nails fiercely into it.

'I want to answer; I must explain!' His voice was broken and unsteady, hardly his own voice at all; this made it worse, and he wanted to weep in impotent rage at his own weakness, to bang his head on the wall in despair.

But then the judge pushed the table back and got up. 'Time for the noon recess.'

The defence advocate came quietly across to him and took out a yellow tobacco pouch. 'A smoke?'

Through the open door he saw Frolitch, arguing with the sentries. 'Look, you're not going to stop me taking a bit of soup to Mikhail, are you? What's up with you? Isn't anyone allowed to see him? It isn't as if he'd done anything wrong. I've known him since the old days at Tengushai, you know, he's always been the lonely kind, I know. Here, you!' — he recognised one of the sentries as an old acquaintance — 'take me along to the boss. Tell him that Frolitch has brought a drop of soup, and wants . . .'

The door banged, and it was quiet: the sentry brought in a bowl of soup and a piece of black bread, which Menahem devoured, but still felt hungry.

Then the court re-assembled, and the judge told the sentry to call Captain Suzayev.

He came down the steps heavily, with a look of boredom on his face, irritation at being called away from his work.

'What can you tell us about the accused?'

'I can't say anything bad about him, but nothing good either. No, nothing good at all, not a scrap. And if the officer commanding a headquarters has nothing good to say of a man, it's

a bad sign. I've known Menahem Issakovitch ever since the regiment was formed: I met him at Zagorsk, and I've come into contact with him any number of times here at Regimental Headquarters. How shall I put it? From the start, he made a doubtful impression on me. I must make it clear that I can't speak freely about him, as I don't want to be suspected of racial prejudice: I would rather err on the side of toleration.'

Nordin the defence advocate had been fidgeting on his chair and putting his glasses on and off: now he jumped up. 'Will the witness please speak straightforwardly, without circumlocutions and innuendoes. Precisely what was that "doubtful impression" which the accused made on you, captain?'

'It's not easy to put in words: let's say it was his general behaviour.'

'Facts, please!' The glasses flashed.

'Well, here's a fact. He was always a gloomy silent type; he used to wander about by himself at night; it made people uneasy and nervous.'

'Is that all?'

'No, far from it. Look how he behaved among the men! Once, in the trenches, a soldier made some joke in his hearing, and the accused simply flung himself at the poor fellow, lashing out with his fists! His trouble is that he is far too sensitive about being a Jew. And then we have these episodes with the prisoners . . .'

The judge interrupted, rather crossly. 'Captain Suzayev, have you anything concrete to bring against the accused? We know all about those episodes with the prisoners. What do you know apart from that?'

There was a moment's silence, with the stove crackling audibly. Then: 'I said at the beginning that I had nothing good to say but nothing . . .'

The prosecutor interrupted him. 'Can't you tell us what kind of influence the accused had on those round him?'

'Not in concrete terms, no. But I do have a feeling that Menahem Issakovitch exercised a harmful influence because of his particular character and situation.'

Menahem jumped up. 'May I have the court's permission to ask Captain Suzayev what "particular character and situation" he has in mind? How am I different from 'everybody else?'

'I've explained that already: these foreign ways of carrying on, it's this restless nervousness . . .'

The judge interrupted again. 'Thank you, captain.'

The evidence given by Zhilin the Political Commissar was precise and emphatic. 'The behaviour of the accused towards that German officer was characteristic of him: it shows that he is not concerned with the collective struggle of our people against the German invader. He has private sentiments and loyalties of his own, and these must be indulged without restraint, regardless of the harm they may do to our corporate and carefully prepared plans. This anarchic individualism must be punished severely: a soldier in the Soviet army cannot be allowed to flout the law like this. The accused is here among us as a foreigner, he comes from a world not ours, a world which has suffered separately at the hands of the Nazis; and that background governs and limits him. Even his personal friendships in the army show how closely he is tied in with his own people. That is all very well in peace-time, but it won't do at the front: now, if he shows signs of avoiding us Russians, he displays a lack of trust and interest in us and our cause. It is most revealing and instructive to study these drawings and posters which the accused made for our war-time press and propaganda.'

Zhilin broke off to gather up some papers off the table and hold them up.

'Let me show you these drawings, and many things will then become quite clear to you. Take any drawing at random. Is this the likeness of a typical Soviet soldier? Not by a long way! And here's a drawing which purports to show a Russian soldier crushing the Nazi serpent: but it actually suggests that the fight is being carried on by the . . . by some other nationality, not by the Russians at all! Then, take a look at these absurdly exaggerated caricatures of the Nazi leaders, making them look

like rats or monkeys. These drawings will have quite the wrong effect: they'll never offer a plausible picture of the enemy as something hateful and contemptible, all they do is to make him — and he is a very formidable enemy, remember! — into something petty and negligible. That'll make us weaker, not stronger!

'All this is a consequence of the hysterical attitude which the accused has allowed himself to adopt. The reasons for that are . . . but there's no need to analyse the theory of it, and that isn't my job at the moment anyway. I shall not show you these fanciful drawings of cities destroyed by the enemy, all ruined synagogues and bearded rabbis. Oh, yes, the feelings of the accused are very natural. But it was extremely rash to put before our own fighting men these pictures of the sufferings of the Jews. Menahem Issakovitch has succeeded in creating the impression that Hitler and his armies are only out to exterminate the Jews! And of course that would operate in favour of the Germans. Our men might reasonably ask themselves what concern it was of theirs, these Jews and their synagogues. The Germans aren't our enemies, they might think, they're only after the Jews! And so, Menahem Issakovitch, you see the outcome of your narrow and self-centred nationalism. Yes, I know it's all very tragic; but even so, drawings of this kind will do more good to the Germans than to our own cause, the cause of right!'

Here the defence advocate interrupted smoothly. 'What you have said amounts to a clever theoretical essay on art and painting in war-time. But you can't bring a charge on those lines! A critical thesis about art is hardly a basis for putting a man on a court-martial charge, even if its author is as well-known an expert on art as our friend here!'

The assessors smiled at that, and there was silence: Menahem kept perfectly still, holding his stomach with both hands and staring at the window.

'Colonel Alexander Yacovlevitch Petrov!' called the judge.

Petrov appeared, solid and cheerful, and stood there for a moment, his brow beading with sweat. The judge called on

him for a statement, and he wiped his forehead and put his fur cap aside.

'I'm fond of the accused, and I don't find it easy to talk about him while he's sitting there facing a charge. But I don't see how his breach of discipline can be overlooked or treated lightly.'

He stood to attention and spoke more sharply. 'We can't bother with psychological theory. This is the front line: thousands and millions of lives are at stake, and our country has called on us to defend every yard of ground. This calls for iron discipline: and the accused failed in that discipline. I myself witnessed the false statement he made when that captured officer was being interrogated. That sort of thing can't be tolerated in the army! It's treason.'

'Were there any similar episodes earlier on?' the prosecutor asked, his eyes flickering aggressively.

'That I can't say. I'm talking about this last episode, the one with the German officer.'

'You don't remember anything else of the same sort?'

'No.' And Petrov left the judge's table, breathing heavily, his face relaxed: he looked at Menahem sorrowfully as he went out.

Now Frolitch came before the court, in some agitation: he pulled off his cap and twisted it nervously in his hands, then clapped it on and stood to attention. 'Permission to report, sir, that Dimitri Frolitch Savielov, soldier, employed as orderly, presents himself before the court in person, in accordance with orders!'

'What can you tell us about Menahem Issakovitch, the accused?'

Frolitch turned and pointed at Menahem. 'You mean Mikhail, I suppose? We always call him Mikhail, it's easier to say. Mena - H - em - nobody can say that, nobody can remember it either. Once at Tengushai there used to be a chap who worked in the stables, Mikhailo they called him: a queer cuss if ever there was one, and one day he——'

'Let's keep to the point. Tell us what happened when the

German officer was brought into the dug-out. You were there, weren't you?' asked the judge.

'Of course I was there. I was putting wood on the stove; it was bad wood that day, wet as if it had come straight out of the river, so I cut some chips and peeled some bark, very good shavings and bark too, I took it from the posts of the dug-out. You see, those dug-outs were built with birch logs, so I got peeling the bark off them with my knife, the one with the pearl handle, and it did very nicely, and . . .'

The court seemed amused, except that Galinkov was impatient. 'All that doesn't matter, get down to it, tell us what the accused did!'

'Well then, gentlemen, there I am on my knees working at this stove, when I hear footsteps and I look up and there's this German, with our chaps guarding him. Well, I ask myself, what have they brought in now? A stick of dry wood! Dry as a match, he looked; put him by the stove, I thought, and he'd go up in flames, that German. So I take a good look at him, and I think, this is the most horrible specimen I've ever seen: wicked little eyes, I think! So then I says to Mikhail — him over there, your prisoner — Mikhail, I says, did you ever see such wicked eyes? I wouldn't have thrown those eyes to the dogs; that's what I thought at the time — throw those eyes to the dogs, and you'll poison them, they'll go mad!'

'Yes, yes; and then what happened?'

'Oh, nothing at all. That old fire burnt up a bit, and it got nice and warm: the wood must have got dry, with that bark blazing away at it. Anyway, I got up and had a good look at the prisoner. Ho, I thought, that's a nice fur coat you've got! And don't you look pleased with yourself, standing up like a dummy and biting your lips and clenching your fists! Then our Mikhail said something to him in German, but quite politely, and he started yelling and gibbering some stupid rubbish in German, ja, ja, ga-ga-ga, so I said to myself, Mikhail, old friend, you want to give him a good slap in the teeth, otherwise I'll have to. My hand isn't soft and gentle, you know! Back in the woods at Tengushai, I used to chop trees down, so

big that all you judges together wouldn't be able to put your arms round, and it made you giddy just looking up to the top of them, and your hat'd fall off. Anyway, here was this bastard, my hand was itching, I just wanted to have a go at him!'

'Did you know the accused at Tengushai?' the prosecutor asked.

'Yes, of course, very well. He comes from Poland.'

'What did he do at Tengushai?'

'A teacher, he was, and in his odd moments he helped around the collective farm. He was a real scholar, we all liked him. My neighbour's daughter Lioska thought a lot of him, she's always writing to him. A nice piece, too, the nicest in the village.'

Whatever questions they put to Frolitch, they could get nothing more out of him. As he was going, the judge spoke jokingly to him. 'Remember, Dimitri Frolitch, you mustn't take the bark off these pillars in the dug-outs: otherwise they'll rot and the whole thing will collapse!'

They all laughed, but Frolitch took it seriously. 'What, are we going to sit in these rat-holes as long as that? Aren't we going out to chase the Germans?'

'Ah, that would be telling!'

From the door, Frolitch called back to the judge: 'I see you know a little about wood: you know that it'll rot once the bark is off it. That's interesting; you must have come from the woods yourself. I like the sort of people who come from villages in the forest — they're fine people, and they . . .'

Then the sentry slammed the door, and he was outside. It was a fine frosty winter's day, clear and windless, and the forest lay pleasantly round the encampment. But Frolitch wanted to weep: only once, waking in the open when the great night attack was on, had he felt such misery.

He could not see what Menahem had done wrong. How could poor Mikhail be guilty of anything? He sat on a log and waited, anxious for company, impatient to know how the court-martial was going. What would they do with Mikhail? The day was short, and there was plenty to do in the dug-out —

lamps to be lit, the stove to be fed, rations to be fetched. But here he was, and here he would stay till he knew. Suzayev and Petrov would not tell him anything. Petrov had already made it clear that he was not going to discuss Mikhail and his troubles. The pair of them had disappeared into another dug-out and were drinking heavily.

Nordin the defence advocate hoped to exploit the relaxed atmosphere which Frolitch and his evidence had created. He rose and smiled at the judge. 'May I speak, Lavrenti Semionovitch?'

The judge pushed his papers aside. 'Certainly: we're listening.'

'The impression which I got from the evidence of Dimitri Frolitch Saviclov is that the German officer behaved in a grossly provocative manner, not as a prisoner should.' Menahem Issakovitch was mildly inaccurate in translating his statement: but I put this down to the way the German was behaving in our headquarters. I feel pretty sure that he had no intention of making any statement to anybody: what he said was only an excuse.

'Most prisoners make no statements at all in the first few hours after being captured. That comes later, when fatigue and depression sets in. This prisoner succeeded in arousing the hatred even of so thorough-going a Russian soldier as this Dimitri Frolitch from Tengushai: note the disgust he felt for him, a natural disgust. So why must we attribute this same natural hatred and disgust to racial sensitivity when Menahem Issakovitch displays it? Has he no right to hate the German invader as we all do? Why do we have to talk about narrow nationalism and sensitivity?'

The judges looked at one another sharply, and Nordin lost his confidence and turned pale: a quick glance showed him that he had annoyed the Political Commissar.

'Of course, I'm not accusing anybody here: and I quite understand that Menahem Issakovitch had no business to make his own decisions. His duty was to translate what the

German said, exactly and objectively; and no evidence has yet been brought to suggest that he didn't do exactly that. None of the witnesses understands German; and so it comes to this, that the charge is actually based on what the German officer said in Russian to Colonel Petrov. So I put it to the court: since when does a Soviet court-martial accept as evidence the word of an enemy and a prisoner? Is that a basis for charging a Soviet officer? I can't see that there was any justification for a court-martial at all: the ordinary divisional or regimental process of routine discipline would have been quite enough. I don't want to suggest that he is entirely innocent: there is good reason, it seems, for dissatisfaction with him, and there is a great deal in what the Political Commissar said about his drawings. It would do the accused a great deal of good to take this seriously: there's a lot to be learnt from criticism of our objective Soviet kind, but it is still only criticism.

'I propose therefore that the case be referred back to the regimental authorities for normal disciplinary action.'

Now the prosecutor spoke, quietly and easily, every word weighed carefully.

'It is not true that the charge is based on an unsupported statement by the prisoner. The accused confirmed subsequently that the German refused to be interrogated by a Jew. On that particular evening, a statement from him would have been of immense value to our staff, and would have saved many lives. If it had been possible to bring him here, you would have understood how vital his information would have been for the attack which was under way; but it would obviously be a grossly unworthy thing for us to listen to a German giving evidence. I can see, however, a number of mitigating circumstances in the case; and I do not ask the court to pass the sentence most usual and appropriate in such cases. I am bearing in mind that the accused belongs to a race which is going through a period of suffering, a race which the Germans are trying to exterminate, and I——'

Menahem stood up. 'I don't want any pity. If I am guilty, then sentence me!'

The judge was angry. 'You were not given permission to speak!'

Night was falling as the sentries led Menahem out of the dug-out. There was Frolitch, still waiting on his log.

'Well, Mikhail, have you got off?'

'I don't know.'

'You'll know soon enough!' one of the sentries remarked.

The three of them rolled tobacco in bits of newspaper: Frolitch pressed his whole pouch on Menahem, and also a lump of bread and dripping. They embraced for a moment, and then Frolitch went off down the snowy path, turning for a moment to shout something back. Menahem caught Lioska's name: no doubt Frolitch would be writing to her, to let them know at home what had happened. He would write to her himself. Anna too: she would have to be told. He would write to them both. Lioska was far away now, by the Moksha, but he felt as if she were near at hand, as if her pale face were before his eyes; she would be coming back from the well at this moment, her two buckets full and swinging from her yoke. The houses of the village would be lying there under the snow, plumes of smoke rising as stoves were lit.

And Anna — she was different, full of the ancient Hebrew sorrow that filled her home in Makhovaya Street. She really was close at hand — a few miles from here, perhaps bending over the bed of some wounded soldier, tense and serious as she always was at such times.

Well, if the war ever came to an end, two roads would be open before him, one leading to Makhovaya Street and one to Tengushai on the banks of the Moksha.

It was a mild evening, and the forest seemed peaceful. Some men went crunching and stamping off down the path, and Zinaida Karpovna ran by in her white jacket. The regimental clerk appeared, leading a group of civilians towards Headquarters. Who could they be? Actors from a Moscow theatre, the sentry explained; they were going to give a performance in the trenches this evening.

The actors came by very close, hungry-looking and cold, their collars turned up: one of them, a woman, trotted along daintily in an army greatcoat. Then he saw their faces: Jewish faces. Dear God in heaven, Jews again!

The judges concluded their discussion, and Menahem stood facing them and their decision.

Why had he this feeling of expectancy? What difference could their sentence make to him? He met Suzayev as he came in, and rubbed his forehead in sudden misery: he wanted to get away from this place and these people as soon as possible.

‘May I make a request?’

In the intense silence that followed these words, he heard a distant voice, far off in the forest.

‘Say what you like,’ said the judge.

‘I would like to be sent to the front line, to the most advanced positions of all. Can that be done at once? I want to fight the Germans, I want to kill them; I’ve been given weapons for that purpose. That’s the best thing that anyone can do for me. I do not want to stay at Headquarters, I want to fight, I want to help drive the Germans away from Moscow and right out of Russia, and out of my own country too. I want to settle my account with them.’

‘Would you like to be transferred to the Polish army?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘I want to stay with the Russians.’

‘How extraordinary!’ murmured the judge.

Once again the court conferred, and then the judge pronounced sentence.

‘Lieutenant Menahem Issakovitch is found innocent of the charge of treason. As he has committed a breach of discipline in the exercise of his duties, he is hereby reduced to the ranks; and by the authority of the staff of the 316th Division, he is to be put at the disposal of the Military Command at Gorki, for service in a Special Unit.’

That same evening they set him free, and gave him a sealed

envelope and a movement order. He was to report at Gorki to the Special Department of the Command there.

He spent the night in the guard-room dug-out, with the sentries off duty. In the morning he was given ten days' dry rations.

Before leaving Headquarters, he went to say goodbye to Frolitch. But he found nobody there, neither Frolitch nor Petrov. His bed was littered with the torn-up scraps of his drawings. The sentries would not let him wait, or even collect his belongings.

'You wait outside, the colonel's coming.'

He gestured helplessly and moved off down the path, pausing where the forest began to gaze once more on the encampment. His eyes were moist.

A lorry came up: 'Where are you off to?' asked the driver. 'Moscow.'

'Get in, then.' The door opened and he climbed in.

At the main road they came across a herd of cattle, thin mangy beasts, their breath freezing about their nostrils, some of them pawing feebly in the snow in search of grass. The men leading them were at a fire they had lit by the roadside.

'They're from farms near the front, those beasts,' said the driver.

'Where are they being taken?'

'Moscow, same as yourself.'

Chapter Ten

TRAINS and stations, all over again.

Nobody knew when trains would be leaving for Gorki, nor when they would arrive there. The lines were packed with goods wagons, thousands of them, from all over Russia, open wagons and closed vans, some new and freshly painted, some old and battered, their body-work broken and their doors torn off so that nothing remained but wheels and flat platforms covered with snow.

An engine whistled from a siding somewhere.

'Attention, all soldiers!' cried a loudspeaker. 'Train number 568 will be leaving now, on line number 22! Attention!'

Soldiers moved among the platforms, kitbags on their backs, and went stumbling off between and under the wagons, bruising themselves, falling and still staggering on: the more agile ones went over the wagons instead of underneath.

'Where the hell's this train, number 568?'

Some of them broke open the door of a van. 'Here we are, let's get in!' Hundreds tried to pile into the train: kitbags were passed up, and those already inside reached down to help their friends.

Menahem had been waiting and wandering for several hours already.

'Buy my razor, it's real steel!' he was implored by a tired and unshaven man, his lips blue, his hand bandaged, his boots sodden. 'I haven't a penny to buy bread with!'

Menahem dropped his small pack from his shoulder and gave the man half a loaf. A crowd gathered round at once.

'Sell it to us! I'll give you sugar for it! I'll give you some fish!'

'No, I don't need anything — no sugar, no razor, nothing.'

It was hard to force one's way into the station: its halls and passages were packed with people camping there with their possessions and luggage about them. Some of them had been there for weeks.

'When is there a train to Gorki?'

To get onto a train, one had to have one's papers stamped by the railway authorities. Menahem joined the queue at a little window. Time passed, and the queue only grew longer.

Then a woman in a railwayman's cap came and announced that there would be no train to Gorki that day. Her quilted jacket was filthy with oil, her voice was deep: only her long blonde hair and her enormous bust showed that she wasn't a man.

A man with long yellow moustaches like straw came up with a kettle. 'Is there any hot water?'

'Yes, go out that way, it's on your right. Across by those trucks, you'll find taps there.'

People ran with pots and kettles, but one of them came back soon with no water. 'There's a long queue there.'

Menahem left the station and walked along a back street; there were factories with broken windows, snowed-up pavements, empty doorways, collapsed walls, torn old posters fluttering like rags, slogans clumsily inscribed on walls and buildings. Old people in shabby clothes and hats stumbled along the pavements with their collars turned up. A column of soldiers, two by two, came round the corner and marched off down the streets of Moscow: slant-eyed Kalmuks, peasants from the Volga, Tartars, a squat Siberian grinning cheerfully.

Midday. Menahem's eyes rested on snow-covered squares, the blue of the winter sky above Moscow, the resigned suffering of its people.

Where could he go now?

He asked nobody for directions, but walked confidently as if he were at home, familiar with every alley of this great city. But often he would stop for a moment, thinking and wondering.

That girl, for example, passing by with such sadness in her eyes: what was he to think?

Anna's name was in his mind, unspoken. He could not leave Moscow so suddenly and unexpectedly without seeing her. She could not be far away: he must see her once more before going.

One of his own posters hung on a crumbling wall: the soldier with rifle held high, trampling down a swastika that was also a four-headed snake.

Now he was in a main road, one that seemed familiar: he had been here before. It was the next turning on the right, surely: he remembered the houses.

He asked an old woman. 'Where is Kaluga Street?'

'This is it, soldier!'

'Thank you, grandma!' How like Mme Korina she was!

There was a sentry at the hospital door, and at a side entrance stood several tarpaulin-covered lorries.

'I want to see Dr. Anna Samoilovna Korina.'

'Wait here, I'll go and ask.'

He sat down on the steps and ate a piece of bread from his bag, realising suddenly how hungry he was.

He was called to a little room, where a nurse questioned him.

'Who are you looking for, soldier?'

'Dr. Anna Samoilovna Korina.'

'Who are you?'

'Just a soldier.'

'And what do you want her for?'

'I want to see her — she's a friend of mine.' He felt confused by this angry and inquisitive nurse.

'A friend, indeed!'

After much telephoning, it turned out that Anna had been transferred to another hospital a few days earlier.

He went back to the station as it grew dark, and wrapped up in his coat to sleep on the cold stone floor.

There would be a train leaving at midnight for Ruzayevka, and there he would change for Gorki.

The doors were open and an icy wind came in. A Ukrainian sat cursing monotonously: someone had stolen his kitbag. A

small child, wrapped in a blanket on its mother's knees, cried pitifully; a Cossack in a red-striped fur hat bent over and smiled at him, showing yellow teeth, and gave him a lump of sugar. 'Here you are, little darling: take this, sweetheart.'

Someone very drunk was singing endless sad songs about the steppes of the Don: when he paused for breath, engines could be heard puffing and grunting in the distance.

With a long-drawn-out wail from the engine, the train moved off into the night. The loose doors banged, and the sheets of metal over the broken windows rattled. There were only crude plank benches: men sat worn out, hunched in corners, sitting on kitbags, wrapped in tattered old coats, fur caps pulled down.

Menahem had to sit on the floor, every kind of seat being taken, but he couldn't sleep there. An icy wind came in round the doors and through the floor, cutting right through him; the wound near his right shoulder opened up again, so that he could not lean that way; his right arm felt numb, and when he rolled cigarettes he did it clumsily.

Everybody else seemed to be asleep: he was alone in the night. He rose and peered out of the broken window, seeing a sky heavily clouded and dark. Clouds of smoke and showers of sparks came from the engine: when the wind hit the train squarely in open country, the smoke rolled off across the fields and the sparks lay blossoming in the grass. The mournful noise of the engine hooted across the desolation of the forest: and the train moved on, leaving its lament to echo across the snowfields, the plains, the woods, the wintering villages.

The guard, a woman, crept round silently, peering into every corner. At every station she went to hold a long discussion with the military authorities there.

'You awake, soldier-boy?'

'Yes! can't sleep.'

'Freezing outside.'

'Very seasonable,' said Menahem.

Back at Moscow, this woman had used her own discretion about whom she allowed on the train. 'Sorry, no room, not

here, move along!’ She turned civilians back, women and children, old people: but she winked at officers and well-set-up soldiers and made signs to them to go round to the other side of the train, and then she let them in and found them good places.

Now she stood at the window, by Menahem’s side, not speaking. By the pale snowlight that came in he could see her broad face; and her hand was on his arm.

‘Where are we now?’

She looked out at the landscape, peering around for some recognisable feature. A tree went by, alone and distinctively twisted, and behind it the top of a tower of some kind. ‘Ah, yes!’ she said. ‘We’ll be at Potma before dawn. We’ll be taking on wood, from the forests there, they’ll have it all ready alongside the line.’

‘How long will we be stopping at Potma?’

‘I don’t know: an hour or so, perhaps.’

‘And when shall we get to Ruzayevka?’

‘Round about midday, I suppose.’

‘And will it be difficult to get a train there for Gorki?’

‘Shouldn’t think so: question of luck really.’

‘Well, thank you.’

‘You don’t come from these parts?’ she asked, curiously.

‘No, I’ve come a very long way. What’s your name?’

‘Nina.’

Then she took him along to her little compartment, where there was a table and paper curtains at the windows. A smoky lamp swayed on the wall.

She took off her fur cap and long hair fell about her shoulders. It was warm in this compartment, and the rattling and roaring of the train seemed to be shut outside. Nina filled two big glasses with brandy.

‘And what’s your name, soldier-boy?’

‘Mikhail.’

‘Let’s drink up: it warms your guts, this stuff.’

She gulped the brandy straight down, wiping her mouth afterwards with an enormous grubby paw. Menahem sipped his and left it standing.

'You ill or something? Can't take it? Ah, you city types, you college lot — I know you: no bloody use in a war and no bloody use to a woman!'

Before the war she had been a waitress in Moscow. Then she had worked in lumber camps round the city, and soon a railway engineer had carried her off to act as a fireman or stoker. All this was counted as war-work. Her old mother lived at Torbayevo and would be waiting there for her whenever the train came through, with a couple of weeks' food packed all ready for her daughter.

Soldiers were all right, she reckoned, as long as you knew how to be nice to them.

'What's the matter with you, my pigeon? Got a wife somewhere, or a girl-friend! You stupid clown! — what do you think she's doing now? She's busy at it this moment, with the farm manager. Women! — don't tell me about them.'

'No, indeed, I've no wife and no girl-friend. All I know is one girl at Tengushai, Lioska. How I'd like to be with her now! Tell me, is Tengushai very far off?' He was taken aback by his own readiness to reveal his secrets to this tough and half-drunk railway woman.

She filled her own glass again, and topped up his. She seemed very drunk now, her brows trembling, malice and anger in her eyes.

'Don't want to drink with me, hey? Don't you fancy it? I'm not good enough for you, aren't I? Rather be drinking with this Lioska, would you? — and getting down to it, I know! What do you think I am — pig-shit? No bloody good? Well, that's what you're saying if you won't have a drink with me. I don't let anybody insult me like that. Oh look at you, you big conceited clown! You get a nice offer, and then you behave like a bloody monk. Hell, if I snapped my fingers there'd be ten men come running, real men, not like you!' She faced him furious with jealousy and hatred.

He edged towards the door, but she flew at him and belaboured him with her fists. He pushed her off, and she fell against the bunk, banging her knee and at once starting to cry,

faintly at first and then in a great howl. The noise was taken up by the engine's hooting, which started at that moment, sending its long cry of misery to howl again across fields, woods, sky, night, rolling smoke, and the hearts of the weary travellers.

They would soon be at Potma now. It had acquired new importance as a centre for the rail traffic from Moscow to the east. In peace-time the little wayside station had dozed while the great expresses thundered through, but now it had grown into an important junction, a place where big engines stood waiting to be refuelled from the forests around.

Here they were, those long stacks of wood piled alongside the line. The rhythm of the wheels slackened as the train slowed down.

Nina sprang up, slammed the door of her compartment and pushed angrily down the corridor; Menahem sat there half-asleep, and she affected not to notice him as she squeezed by.

At Potma, the train stopped at the main platform, not in a siding. A big double gate was flung open, and a mob of peasants pressed in, furred and belted, loaded with bags and baskets. The guards — all of them women — stood on the steps of the coaches, rattling their keys.

'Further down! No room here! Try the back of the train!'

Military police in red caps moved along and around the train. Nina jumped down and spoke to them; an armed patrol came to listen, and soon there was an open-mouthed circle around her.

Menahem opened his eyes sleepily and saw in the corridor two armed men, and Nina with them, coming towards him.

'That's him, the one who was acting suspiciously!' she pointed.

Menahem tried to rise, but his arms were gripped. 'Your papers!'

'All right, but let me breathe; and why throw yourselves on me like that?'

He unbuttoned his tunic, watching Nina, who stood by indifferently. One of the soldiers, a red-faced Georgian with a

cleft nose and straggly yellow hair, searched through his pockets.

'Is this' going to take all day? Get your hands off, can't you!' Menahem shouted in irritation.

'Ah, shut up. We know about you.'

'You know about me, do you? And who do you think you are? An official patrol? How am I to know that? Why should I believe you? No, you're not getting my papers, I'll produce them at the military police office, nowhere else! Not here!'

'Come along, then, if that's how you want it,' grunted the man with the cleft nose, and they left the train.

A dried-up sort of man with an irregular bald dome of a head turned Menahem's papers over and over in his bony hands, his fingers creaking, tobacco-stained and papery. He muttered and grumbled vaguely. 'Ah yes; h'm! We'll see . . . well, h'm, there it is, there it is.'

Menahem looked at his watery eyes and tried to follow these confused mutterings. Then the man spoke sharply. 'Aren't you supposed to be going to Gorki? Then what in hell are you doing here?' A dry voice like spilt sawdust.

'I couldn't get a through train from Moscow. They told me to go through Ruzayevka: they send people off as best they can, to keep the crowds in the stations at Moscow from getting too big.'

'All right, you can go.'

When he left the office, he saw his train just moving off. His own carriage went by, and there was Nina standing in the open door and grinning. Then he realised that he hadn't got his pack: he had left it in the carriage.

Back at the office, they gave him a ration ticket for half a loaf and a plate of soup.

'When will there be a train to Ruzayevka?'

'Quite soon, perhaps; or perhaps tomorrow at the same time. Not all the trains stop here, and nobody really knows.'

A railwayman advised him to go to Barashovo, and from there by the narrow-gauge line through the Temlag area to T'engushai,

and then on to Murom, where there were regular trains straight through to Gorki.

The station at Barashovo, no more than a shed, was full of people: ragged people, with bast sandals tied with sacking, or boots improvised from bits of old lorry tyres, all of them undernourished and ill-dressed.

‘Let’s have a pull at your cigarette, son!’

Menahem gave the man some tobacco. ‘Where are you from?’

The man looked apprehensively round and said nothing. Somebody closed the window, and then a long shadow or scarecrow got up shakily and said in a hurried whisper: ‘Give us a bit of bread!’

‘Who are you?’

‘I’m from the Temlag. I’ve been let out. We’re all going home to make room for others.’

Menahem was aware then of one of the armed guards of the place, standing behind him. He turned and asked: ‘I’m going to Tengushai: when will the train be?’

‘Those cattle-trucks! They’ll be here tonight.’

The guard went, but turned in the door to ask: ‘Have you got a pass?’

‘Do I need one?’

‘What do you think? And a Health Department Certificate as well, see!’

But these documents were not easily secured at the office.

‘This is a prohibited area, you know: except in very exceptional circumstances.’ They telephoned to the officer in charge at Potma, and Menahem’s account of himself was confirmed: he had missed the train and left his pack on it, but through no fault of his own. It was lucky he had his papers on him, otherwise things would have been difficult.

He managed to convince the official that he had already been through this area on his way from his home at Tengushai; then he was given a pass and a note exempting him from disinfection.

‘I can see you’re hygienic enough. But that wouldn’t do

you any good with these people unless you slipped them something, they'd put all your clothes under the steam steriliser, and they'd come out like bits of cobweb, and there you'd be with nothing to wear.'

He spent the rest of the day wandering in the cleared areas that had recently been thick forest. Everywhere were men moving like grey shadows, aimless and lost, drifting here and there like wisps of cloud in a sad world.

These were men set free from the Temlag, the concentration camps, after many years: they had no homes now to go back to, and so they could only stay here as watchmen.

That evening, Menahem came back to Tengushai.

The broad fields between Alexandrovo and the Moksha had been flooded in the autumn, and now they were frozen. Here and there the wind had blown the snow into drifts, exposing the gleaming ice below.

He was riding behind an unshod horse; the beast would stumble and fall on its front feet, slithering on the ice, so that the low sleigh skidded into its hindquarters and hind legs. The windmills still stood on the higher bank of the Moksha, silhouetted against the evening snow, held in the frost's grip and unmoving. Down the snow-covered track from Krasni-Yar came a peasant woman, wrapped in furs, a bundle of sticks on her back. Snow crunched underfoot like glass: the horse's mouth foamed, and the foam froze on him like snow.

There was smoke at the chimneys of Alexandrovo and Krasni-Yar: they would be making soup, and the stoves, lit only once every day, were smoking busily. There, across the river, was Tengushai. The river itself was frozen: and the bridge had been taken down some time in the autumn and replaced by a wooden structure of logs and chains.

'Not much traffic here, these days,' observed the driver. 'Look at the snow. See those tracks? — just two sleighs came out of Tengushai today, see, and one of them was mine, this morning. Someone else must have gone off somewhere today and not come back yet: now who could that be?' He

cracked his whip idly and considered the problem. 'Old Ivan, the lame one, you know him? No, not him, I was talking to him yesterday. Or maybe Garukhin the postman?'

The main street of the village was empty and under snow. The well-covers were sheeted with ice, and buckets festooned with icicles hung from them; the windows of the houses were frozen up, the porches thick with snow, but dark narrow trodden paths were visible, leading from one house to another. The three willows hung over the street, a dark formless mass: their lower branches had been eaten off during the autumn by famished goats and sheep.

One old woman peeped from her window, and another appeared in her door, fur coat across her shoulders. A door groaned open, and the sleigh came into a little yard. The squeak of the door, the sound of the horse's hooves, footsteps at doors: these unaccustomed noises woke the people up from their evening doze.

'Here's Makar back from Barashovo; and it looks as though he's got somebody with him.'

Hands were rubbed on frosted windows, old eyes were wiped with rheumatically fingers, evening prayers were muttered.

Menahem stepped up to the door, full of an immense gladness: he was back at Tengushai! In a moment he would see his old friends Maria Periferovna and Ivan Ivanovitch, and Lioska was near. Here, among these old Russian peasants, bearded and oddly dressed, he could find a home at last, after all his wanderings.

The old couple greeted him with open arms. Maria wept for joy: she went to her ikons and uttered profound thanks to St Nicolas, worker of miracles, for this latest miracle.

'Glory to him! I've wept so much, and now my eyes see you! I have suffered so much, and here you are!'

The bright samovar sang on the table: Ivan came up from the cellar with potatoes and pickled cabbage.

These old people were childless; and while all the rest of the village was mourning the men who had gone away and died, Maria and Ivan would have had nobody of their own to grieve

for unless Menahem, a foreigner and a Jew, had come to share their home. From that day on, they had treated him as a son, speaking of him proudly, explaining on every occasion that it had been them who saw him off to the war. After he had gone, news had reached them occasionally through Frolitch and Lioska; then one day they themselves heard from him; and now, unbelievably, here he was in person.

'We'll heat up a bath for you: rest while you can, you poor boy. Poor lads, they're killing you all off! What a terrible war!'

The women of the village pressed into the room in their black, fluttering in like starlings to perch in rows on the narrow benches, giving tongue to the intolerable grief in them.

'Misha, Mikhail, have you come across my fellow? Did you see my husband anywhere? You were all driven off together, surely you can tell me something about him?'

And so he told them what he could about what had happened to the men of Tengushai and Bashkirtzi and Krasni-Yar; and of Frolitch he had much to say.

'Yes, Dimitri Frolitch is safe and sound, I've only just come away from him -- we were together all the time.'

'We must tell Anastasia, she'll be so happy!'

'Yes, I daresay she will!' a woman sobbed. 'But all the rest of us have been told that our husbands are dead!'

Menahem kept his eyes on the door waiting for Lioska to come. Old Maria understood.

'Ivan,' she said to her husband, 'run across to Molkin's house and tell them that Mikhail is here. Lioska ought to know about it, eh?'

The women sighed and muttered and nodded among themselves, fidgeting with their coloured scarves. Menahem stopped the old man.

'Don't you bother, Ivan -- I'll go myself, but I'll just rest a bit first. I can't stay long, I'm just passing through.'

'Where are they sending you?'

'Gorki.'

‘And what then?’

‘That’s anybody’s guess: another regiment, perhaps.’

Lioska had already heard that he was back, and she ran to old Ivan’s cottage and paused on the threshold, her face rosy with the frost, her fur jacket hung loosely so as to show her brightly-embroidered dress beneath.

‘Come in, Lioska, my dear, come in and sit down!’ said Maria. ‘Not stuck there in the docr, are you?’

Lioska coloured, stepped forward, and paused; her hands shook and she clutched them to her bosom.

‘Oh, Mikhail!’ and she sat down by the stove with the rest and fidgeted with her skirt, staring up at him and then lowering her eyes again, modestly.

Then her old mother came, and invited Mikhail to their own home. ‘You’re one of the family, you know: you must come, Lioska has never stopped talking about you, and we’ve been praying for you so much!’

The other women left, one by one, and Lioska felt more at ease. She sat at the table with Menahem, peeling hot potatoes beside him: he noticed with admiration how neatly she got several of them peeled while they were still too hot for him to hold at all.

‘Go on, Mikhail, help yourself!’ They dipped the floury potatoes in a heap of salt on the table, and ate them with salted cucumber and pickled cabbage and damp heavy bread made from bran and potatoes. They drank unsweetened tea, helped down with chunks of bread dipped in salt.

Old Ivan unlaced his boots and unwound his leggings and put them by the stove to dry, while Maria filled pots and put them on the stove for the morning hot water, so that there would be nothing to do then but get the fire going. Ivan brought in a bundle of wood and flung it down: his wife put it to dry by the stove during the night, so that it would burn easily the next morning.

Menahem sat exhausted and drowsy at the table, head on hands; Lioska helped Ivan to make ready a place on the stove where he could sleep. Then she came over to the table again,

on tiptoe so as not to wake him; but he was not asleep, he felt her hand stroking his hair, and his eyes filled and the tears ran down so that he tasted the salt of them.

The little flame before the ikons began to smoke and flicker: Maria Periferovna was there, silent and erect in that holy corner. St Nicolas with his staring eyes and his painted cheeks could hardly be seen now, but the silver nimbus around his head gleamed strangely in the cottage darkness.

Soon after midnight, a goat bleated sadly in a yard nearby, and Menahem awoke to find his wounded shoulder painful. He turned over carefully and stared for a while at the dark of the windows, wide awake. Then Maria whispered: 'We can't get any sleep, what with that creature: she belongs to Yakavlevna, she'll be having her kid tonight.'

'They ought to take her indoors,' Ivan muttered. 'The kid won't survive outside in a frost like this.'

Maria went out to the porch when morning came, and there was a great clanging of buckets. She went off to the lake, as lake water was reckoned better than well water: off she went, with a word to the neighbours on the way, across the new untrodden snow, the two buckets swinging on the yoke across her shoulders.

Soon she was back, and the fire blazed up in the stove and shone on her hands and face. She was old: her chin was pointed, her cheeks weatherbeaten, her blue eyes moist and feeble.

Menahem got down from the stove, pulled on his boots and a civilian shirt and went outside to wash in snow and cold water. When he came in a bowl of hot cabbage soup stood ready on the table, with chunks of bread: they ate in silence, making the most of every bite of bread, every spoonful of soup. Ivan dipped his spoon into the bowl and carried it from there to his mouth with a piece of bread held underneath to catch the drops. Afterwards he wiped his beard with his hand, drank two mugs of water from a barrel, and went cap in hand to the door. Before going he paused a moment before the ikons, then closed the door after him without another word: and off he

went to the collective farm office, to see what tasks had been allocated to him for that day.

Menahem was idle and restless that morning: he lay by the window open-eyed, brooding over the pain in his shoulder and the weakness of his knees. From time to time he got up and looked impatiently out of the window: but the street was always empty, under its blanket of snow.

Lioska went off to the mill at dawn, taking a few pounds of wheat to be ground. She had knocked at the window on her way by, laughing happily: Menahem saw her fresh complexion, her high white boots, the little bag on her shoulder, and he gazed after her, full of thoughts. She walked briskly, red skirt swinging: she would not be back till midday.

By dusk he was in her home, eating wheaten pancakes specially made in his honour. He would have to be off tomorrow, making his way somehow — mostly on foot — to the station at Murom. She was getting a bag of food ready for him: a loaf wrapped in a pretty napkin, a bag of salt, some sugar, some milk in bottles. She tied the whole bag up neatly with string for easy carrying.

'It's nothing, Mikhail.' Her eyes shone with tears: she had been weeping to herself in a corner. Her mother criticised this. 'What a way to carry on! Let's not have any more snivelling! Whatever will Mikhail think?'

She finished her work and preparations at the stove, and came across to the table and stood there shyly.

'Sit down, Alexandra!'

It excited Lioska to hear Menahem address her by her full name, which normally only her mother used. She took his head in her warm hands, pulling it down to her knees: he felt cradled in her warmth and her savour of fresh bread and pine-sap and new-mown hay.

As always, there was a black curl falling across his forehead: she turned and twisted it round her finger.

'Misha, you're my black devil, you're my terrible black-eyed monster, you are, my poor lost little mouse. . . .'

'Alexandra!' her mother called out, 'have you given the sheep their hay?'

'Yes, she remembered!' Menahem answered. 'I can smell the hay on her hands!'

And so they stayed on that bench till late at night, while the old woman fussed around with pots and bowls in the kitchen corner. Then she went over to the stove and spread quilts and furs on it. 'A nice warm stove, eh?'

She came over to them. 'Children, it's getting late; don't sit around like that!'

Menahem got up and stood in the middle of that tiny cottage, birth-place and dying-place to untold generations of Russian peasants, abandoned now to an old woman and a girl.

'I must go: Ivan will be waiting. Tomorrow morning I'll be off, but I'll come first thing and say goodbye.'

Lioska's shoulders sagged and shook as she wept almost silently, uttering only a tiny moan like something far away, a sound such as you can hear at night-time when it is winter in the village and the doors are all shut and the plains and forests press closely around, the sound of woman crying for new life.

The old woman heard it and understood, her heart grieving for her daughter.

Menahem hesitated before going, his hand still on Lioska's shaking shoulder. 'Oh Mikhail, Misha, I'll never see you again!'

And so the old woman whispered to him. 'Stay here, Mikhail. Be kind to her, make her happy, don't go! Look, the stove's lovely and warm! You sleep here, and then in the morning we'll see you off; you'll be one of the family then. . . .'

She spread the bedclothes over them, and went across to pass the night by herself, before the ikons. And that was how Menahem spent his last night at Tengushai.

At dawn Lioska put Menahem's pack on her shoulder and set off with him down the road to Murom, with her mother and Maria Periferovna and Ivan.

The women of the village watched them go and crossed themselves, with a prayer for their own men far away and lost among the icy battlefields round Moscow, and for this stranger too, foreigner and Jew though he might be.

He arrived at Gorki and reported to headquarters, an old building within the ancient Kremlin of the city that had once been Nizhni-Novgorod.

The long dark corridors were packed with recruits: they sat cross-legged on the floor, leaning against the stone walls, some grubbing in their packs, some eating off their knees, smoking, coughing, spitting. One was cursing steadily in an unfamiliar language; there were several drunks singing dirty songs by a barred window; a meagre light came in and shone on the coppery complexions of a party of Caucasians.

Menahem found an open door where a gleam of grey dusty light came through, and there he stood, until a long sergeant, bullet-headed and brown, roared him away. 'Off that door, you! Find yourself a place and wait like everybody else. Look at him, the big —— !' And he delighted the other men there with an obscene joke.

Someone pulled his sleeve. 'Move over, can't you? It's dark enough without you in the way!' Up and down the corridor he went, but found nowhere to sit down.

'What's he doing, having a walk in the park?'

'Look at him, what a sweetheart! Hey, you've forgotten your bit of blossom! Not much good in these nice dark alleys without her, eh?'

A hollow cruel laugh came from close beside him, and then a little wizened fellow jumped up with a towel round his head and grabbed Menahem's arm with a whore's gesture that set the whole corridor bawling with laughter.

Gradually his eyes became used to the near-darkness and he could make out faces, tired and dishevelled. The wizened one moved up to make room for him. 'All right, sit down then, that's enough parading.'

At midday they were all pushed out into an open courtyard,

and Menahem saw that the men were dressed in the most random miscellaneous fashion, some in second-hand army greatcoats, some in tattered jackets. They formed a line, dragging their dirty packs behind them. Some of them could hardly stand up, but collapsed onto their packs at the first opportunity.

The sergeant came, seeming even taller and bonier by daylight. All round the courtyard ran a wall, with barbed wire on top.

'Where are we going?'

'To eat.'

'Why is it all guarded like this?'

'So that we don't run away, stupid!'

'Do people get sent off to the front from here?'

'They get sent off all right, but God knows where. Some of us think it's to work, not to the army. That's a lot worse. If they put you to work, you starve.'

'What are you, a Russian?' Menahem had noticed the little man's odd accent.

'I'm a Caucasian.'

'What about the rest?'

He did not hear the answer: the gates opened just then, and the men filed out of the courtyard.

Narrow twisting alleys, old houses with peeling paint and plaster, roofs and cornices sagging: windows high and narrow, high pavements with deep gutters; people tired and shabby in wretched old coats and jackets, utterly down-at-heel.

At the mess-hut, a long queue. The glass in the doors and windows had been broken and replaced by rough boards. An armed soldier stood at the door, and the men waited by a wall, moving about and clapping their hands to keep warm.

High narrow tables in the mess-hut, so that you had to eat standing up; twenty-five men to each table: and one bowl of watery soup between them, shared out onto tin plates. Each man had a spoon, or else drank straight from the tin plate.

Bread only once a day, in the evening: one little square loaf between ten men.

By the door out of the mess-hut, starving children, holding their hands out desperately. The sergeant counted the men again and again, swearing more obscenely every time. Back in the corridor, a mad rush for places to sit, with arguments and scuffles.

‘How long have you been here?’

‘Four days now.’

‘You’re a Tartar?’

‘Yes, from the Crimea.’

‘Why did you get sent here?’

‘My regiment sent me: they don’t trust us. You’ll find everybody here, every race, except Russians! That’s how it is, my friend.’

Menahem got up. There must be some mistake! ‘They couldn’t have meant to send him here, among Tartars from the Crimea and Tchetchens and such people. This was no place for him!’

He ran to the door and found the tall sergeant. ‘Let me in, I want to see whoever’s in charge.’

A shaven-headed soldier sat there and looked up as Menahem came in. ‘Look, I must explain. This can’t be right, there must be some mistake. I’m Jewish, and I’m a front-line soldier, from the Moscow front. I was posted to another unit, and I’ve got accidentally caught up in this. . . . Look, go through my papers, here they are, just look!’ And he pulled out several documents that he still had, and spread them out on the table.

Neither the sergeant nor the shaven-headed man bothered to look at his papers. ‘The sergeant pushed them aside.

‘A Jew, are you? There’ve been plenty of Jews sent here. The authorities don’t make mistakes. Right?’

That December saw the Germans icebound and immobile before Moscow, unable to think of anything but the coming of spring and warmer weather.

In the early part of the month they began to strengthen their flanks in the Mozhaïsk and Kudrino districts — a tacit admission that Soviet resistance had obliged them to modify their original plan. Their concern now was to secure their lines of communication in the direction of Volkolomsk, Dorokhovo and Ruza, where they depended on roads solid enough to take their heavy tanks. They selected this region because of the natural defensive positions it offered. Towards Mozhaïsk and Zvengorod the Russians were protected by the curve of the river Moskva; the German concentration at Mozhaïsk was protected by Dorokhovo, Tutchkovo, and Kalubanovo, as well as their communications centre at Ruza.

Then Soviet forces of tanks and cavalry drove the Germans out of Dorokhovo and Tutchkovo and Kalubanovo, thus exposing their position at Mozhaïsk and initiating a period of crisis for them. On the 15th, Russian tanks occupied Garbovo and destroyed the German garrison there; Davidovskoye was liberated at the same time, and four German divisions were in danger of being cut off. The Germans began to pull these units back towards the main roads, with all their equipment, so as to enable them to withdraw to the west if necessary.

These developments caused the initiative to pass from the Germans to the Russians: and the invaders were harassed incessantly by flying columns of Russians. It was obvious now that the Russian army before Moscow was immensely strong, and that the city would be held.

Things quietened down, and the Russians prepared a major offensive: meanwhile, they sent out well-clothed and well-fed patrols to slip through the blizzards and the terrible cold and worry the Germans. Headquarters staffs had plenty to do, and the Political Commissars were especially busy: they and the Special Department kept a very close eye on the attitudes and conduct of the men everywhere, and it was in the course of these precautionary measures that Menahem had found himself court-martialled.

Anna was sent by air behind the German lines, to somewhere near Smolensk. They needed a doctor urgently for

the partisan groups operating in the forests there, so off she went in a light aircraft, straight from hospital to the airstrip, and with no notion where she was going until the moment of take-off.

And as she flew, a train was crawling from Gorki towards the Urals, packed with half-frozen men crouching round inadequate tin stoves. The train would stop for the night at some remote siding, and the men went off to scabble desperately in the snow for firewood; failing that, they used fences, the steps and doors off the wagons they were travelling in, anything they could find.

Menahem was in one wagon, crouched in a corner, staring at the walls: he had not budged for two days.

Someone spoke to him in Yiddish, but he did not turn his head.

One night, somebody came to bring him closer to the stove.

'Make room, let this chap get warm, otherwise he'll freeze to death. Is he ill or something?'

The glow from the tiny stove lit up his drawn and haggard features. He tried to shut his eyes, but their lids were too swollen. People jabbered hoarsely round him, but he could not understand what they said.

'Drink this,' a voice said in Yiddish, and he felt the warmth of a mug of hot water.

Next morning he managed to get up. He wanted to thank whoever had helped him last night.

All round him were the men he had first met in that dark corridor at Gorki. They helped him off with his boots, they undid his leggings and tried to dry them at the stove.

'Come on, laddie, come closer, get warm!'

On and on went the train, across the snowy plains, further and further from Moscow. He pulled himself together: he must find that man, the one who had spoken to him that night in Yiddish. He asked all around, but no one could help him. Some of them could not understand what he said.

Had he dreamt it? Or was it rather that the man, whoever

he was, was reluctant to declare himself a Jew? Was it the same here as it had been at the front?

A week later he found himself in the Ural coal mines, dropping from the misty light of a cold dawn to the darkness underground: a terrible giddiness overwhelmed him as the cage plunged down, down, down, into the thick night of the world's centre.

THE END